

Teacher mental health during COVID-19

Pandemic Research Report

CTF/FCE

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This report is dedicated to the teachers and education workers who have shouldered the cost of their mental health and well-being to continue to support students and their communities throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

For teachers the costs are all too real

A foreword by CTF/FCE President Sam Hammond

When the pandemic brought life as we knew it to a screeching halt and forcefully shuttered schools across the country, few were aware that a crisis in public education was already well underway. COVID-19 may have been an unexpected and devastating shock to the system, but a virus had already taken hold, leaving Canada's public-school systems vulnerable at the worst possible moment.

Years and even decades of underfunding, understaffing, and increased demands both in and outside the classroom were coupled with outdated and inadequate infrastructure and resources. The burden of keeping public education operational had been downloaded onto the backs of teachers, school staff, and administrators. So, when COVID hit, too many people were already stretched far too thin.

Nearly two years into this health and social crisis, schools may be still standing, but the people who keep them running and work to ensure children and youth continue receiving an education, are on the brink of collapse. Canada's teachers and education staff are burnt out; emotionally exhausted from having to jump from precarious in-person to emergency remote teaching, often without notice, preparation, or proper resources, working to keep their students engaged and looked after, all the while having to juggle the demands of family, loneliness, and ever-growing uncertainty brought on by lockdowns, physical distancing, and the ever-present threat of getting sick.

This latest Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF/FCE) report, *But at What Cost?*, provides sobering and at times heartbreaking first-hand accounts of the mental health toll the pandemic has leveled on teachers across the country. Stemming from the 2020 pan-Canadian survey on mental health, teachers shared how before and during the pandemic they continue to carry the burden, in and out of the classrooms, psychologically, emotionally, and physically, for their students, colleagues, parents, and their own close relations. The unpredictable changes and new "invisible" workload are additional responsibilities that are once again placed on the shoulders of teachers and out of their control. As one teacher put it, for them and their students, it was "a year of stretching the elastic as far as it would go, until it was almost broken."

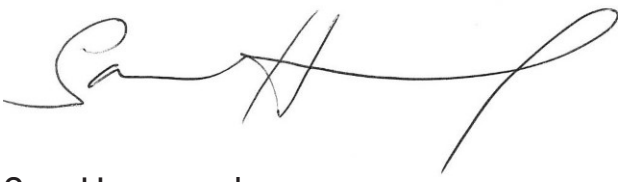
At its essence, *But at What Cost?* exposes three key areas inflicting undue stress on teachers. The first concern that the report lays bare is that the lines between home and work life are blurred beyond belief. Teachers are being pulled in multiple directions and are, due to both the mounting demands and growing digital connectivity, increasingly always "on". This shrinking separation between teachers' personal and professional lives is a driving cause behind exhaustion and burnout.

The second, and caused by the pandemic, details how teachers are collectively experiencing an omnipresent sense of emergency, uncertainty and crisis, which has reached a point of unsustainability. As this pandemic continues to find new ways to disrupt daily life, anxieties are certain to increase.

And the third key area of concern is directly linked to teachers' overwhelming selflessness. Teaching, along with the myriad of roles in any given school, as any of my colleagues can attest, is a labour of love. But we are seeing teachers and education support staff putting their students' needs and concerns above their own. If we fail to collectively step in to support them when they need it most, we set the stage for children and youth, and our communities at large, to suffer the consequences.

As difficult as it is to read the experiences shared by teachers, it is my hope that their courage and dedication sheds light on the reality facing the profession and our publicly funded public education systems. I want to thank and express my gratitude to the teachers who fearlessly opened to allow us all a first-hand look at what they have and continue to endure. You have carried your students through this extraordinary moment in time, and now it is up to the rest of us to make sure that you are properly supported and cared for.

Of course, this report was made possible by the incredible work of the CTF/FCE team. I would especially like to thank Pamela Rogers, Director of Research and Professional Learning, and Nichole Grant, Researcher and Policy Analyst, for their exhaustive efforts required to produce *But At What Costs?*. My thanks also go to Graphic Designer Rolf-Carlos Klausener who created a visually stunning report.



Sam Hammond
President

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Acronyms

PEITF	Prince Edward Island Teachers' Federation
NSTU	Nova Scotia Teachers Union
NBTA	New Brunswick Teachers' Association
QPAT	Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers
AEFO	Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens
ETFO	Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario
OECTA	Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association
OSSTF/FEESO	Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation
MTS	The Manitoba Teachers' Society
STF	Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation
ATA	The Alberta Teachers' Association
BCTF	British Columbia Teachers' Federation
NTA	Nunavut Teachers' Association
YAEP	Yukon Association of Education Professionals
RPL	CTF/FCE Research and Professional Learning Department
CTF/FCE	Canadian Teachers' Federation

Pandemic Research: "Teachers are asking to be heard"



Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected public education in innumerable ways, from the oscillating closures of school buildings, increased public health measures and sanitation protocols, to ongoing pedagogical shifts between in-person, virtual, and hybrid learning. As we continue to navigate COVID-19 variants and subsequent waves of infection as a collective, the impact of the sustained stressors on teachers and education workers cannot be ignored.

This report is the third CTF/FCE research study on teachers' experiences in the pandemic, which follows two pan-Canadian surveys from June and October 2020. The first survey, Canadian Teachers Responding to Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic Research Study, garnered 17,442 completed open and closed-ended responses on four themes: well-being and equity, technology use and online instruction, pedagogy and the profession of teaching, and the return to school buildings.[1] The follow-up report, Canadian Teachers Responding to Coronavirus

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(COVID-19): Pandemic Research Study, Mental Health Report[2] detailed the mental health struggles teachers were experiencing in the first wave of the pandemic, with long hours of online instruction, juggling personal and professional responsibilities while working from home, and worrying about the uncertain future they were going to face in fall 2020.

A follow-up quantitative survey specifically on teacher mental health and well-being was sent to CTF/FCE members in October 2020, which gathered results from over 13,000 public school educators. The report, Teacher Mental Health Check-in Survey: Pandemic Research Report[3] documented how education workers' mental health has continued to deteriorate during the return to school buildings in the 2020-2021 school year, causing concern for teacher well-being moving into the second pandemic school year.

While the two surveys provided a wealth of data documenting teachers' experiences in the pandemic, including their concerns with student mental health and their colleagues' well-being, there was a need to humanize the quantitative results to include deeper connections to education workers as they continued to navigate their jobs and personal lives into the spring of 2021. In the October 2020 survey, over 2,200 survey participants volunteered to be contacted for a follow-up interview, which illustrated educators' need and desire to share their experiences living through the COVID-19 pandemic, and to have their voices heard.

Starting in January 2021, CTF/FCE researchers, Dr. Pamela Rogers, and Nichole Grant began qualitative interviews with a strategic representative stratified sampling of education workers who agreed to be contacted through the October 2020 survey. The Research and Professional Learning (RPL) team spoke with 32 educators from across Canada. In these interviews, teachers were given the space to explore the details of what factors most greatly added to their workload, to provide examples of the difficulties and frustrations they were feeling navigating emergency remote teaching, and the unpredictable changes it brought. They were also able to share stories of their struggles, their resistances, their resilience, and their fears that they might not be able to sustain their work through the remainder of the year.

An unexpected outcome emerging from the interview process was realizing the sustained depth and intensity of education workers' struggles across Canada. Although we had data indicating what difficulties teachers faced earlier in the pandemic, and the effects on their mental health and well-being, the collected narratives from the interviews demonstrated specifically how and why various aspects of their professional lives were contributing to a decline in mental health. Through listening to education workers, we were able to gather information that the quantitative results lacked: an in-depth understanding of living through a pandemic as a teacher, the breadth of associated emotions and affects this experience has wrought, and personal sacrifices that were necessary to continue working during a time of crisis.

This report centers the stories and voices of teachers. We organize these experiences and stories around three major spheres that greatly influence teacher mental health and well-being: workload, pedagogy, and the teaching profession. Each sphere illustrates how education workers experienced the pandemic through different aspects of their work. In the first section, workload is explored using the body as a metaphor for the ways in which various parts of the work have left a mark on teachers' bodies, including the emotional, psychological, and physical weight that teachers continue to carry as part of their workload. The second sphere explores how changes to pedagogy, or 'pedagogical pivots' created multiple issues in connecting with students and colleagues, in expectations and ability to assess and appropriately and meaningfully deliver curriculum, and in how the sense of emergency embedded itself in teachers' learning and working environments. Lastly, the third sphere explores aspects that are outside of education workers' control, in terms of professional obligations, sense of autonomy in their professional expertise, and personal perceptions of the profession, as professional circumstances orbiting around them are often out of reach and beyond their grasp.

When understood together, teachers' narratives form an ecology of mental health and well-being subjective to, and inflected by, these three major spheres of influence. Understanding these dynamics better helps us understand the complexities of teaching during an extended crisis, it provides detailed accounts of the factors related to educator mental health and well-being, and provides insights to better support and advocate for education workers.

One teacher succinctly described the importance of this work:

> **And every single time that we've had any new changes coming out of COVID and coming out of recovery, from the teachers, I've been receiving the same concerns that nothing's happening to us and we're just being told what to do and we'll do it with a smile on our faces, because that's what we're told to do, but nobody is standing up for us... The teachers are mainly asking to be heard. That's the common thread through all of this.**
>
> (NBTA, secondary, 43)

Current Context: Mental Health in an Ever-Evolving Pandemic



nitial research from Canada has demonstrated the unprecedented and unfolding challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic starting spring 2020 has imposed on Canadians' collective mental health and well-being. Innumerable news articles, grey literature reports, and academic studies continue to voice concern over the negative mental health effects from the COVID-19 pandemic on all segments of the population in Canada, and internationally. Concerns were particularly strong for those who were, and continue to be, required to act as frontline workers during a health crisis, or whose futures were most affected during the vast changes to many aspects of our lives, including lengthy lockdowns, the disappearance of our social outlets, and the move to remote work for those whose jobs could accommodate such shifts.[4] A nationally representative study of 65,000 respondents for instance, showed that Canadians self-reported that their mental health was "somewhat worse" (28%) or "worse" (10%) due to the COVID-19 pandemic.[5]

An ongoing concern for Canadian teachers' unions and educational researchers, however, is the mental health and well-being of teachers and education workers in every province and territory, as they continue to act as frontline workers throughout the pandemic. To this end researchers Kim, Oxley, and Asbury asked teachers: "What makes a great teacher during a pandemic?" They identified two themes: caring for their students' well-being and dealing with uncertainty. They argue that these are qualities teachers identified as intensifying during the pandemic, but in general are necessary qualities for great teachers. Further, the authors suggest professional development and teacher preparation programs could benefit from highlighting and supporting teachers' development of these qualities.[6]

In her book, *Teacher well-being: Looking after yourself and your career in the classroom,* scholar and practitioner Elizabeth Holmes discusses the obvious and "hidden" factors that affect teacher mental health and wellbeing. In these factors, both obvious – like workload or work-life balance – and more hidden – like the public image of teachers or their own emotional relationship to teaching – Holmes points out teaching has been understood popularly and academically as a "stressful profession."[7]

Yet, Holmes indicates the deeper issue in this fact is that the teaching profession "*continues* to be experienced"[8] as a stressful profession. Though these stressors are repeatedly acknowledged by educators themselves, researchers, and even administration, there has been little change in education workers' professional circumstances to address this continued trend. Further, a meta-analysis by Tracy Vaillancourt and colleagues on teacher mental health describes the complex and multifaceted factors that continue to

contribute to, and affect, teacher stress globally. These factors, which include looking at structural differences in gender identification, years of experience, grade level assignment, as well as how the added factors of implementing programs like inclusive education without proper resourcing, have been shown to be key variables in understanding teacher stress and well-being. These studies suggest teacher mental health and stress were concerning factors in the teaching profession prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.[9]

The COVID-19 pandemic has only made things more difficult for education workers.

A 2021 research study done by the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) reports that teachers' mental and physical health has worsened during the course of the pandemic.[10]

In particular, the study reports that "teachers are experiencing more stress and health risks with increased workload during the COVID-19 pandemic."[11]

Similarly, a 2021 study completed by the University of British Columbia found over 80% of teacher reported their mental health "has been slightly or significantly worse since the start of the pandemic."[12]

A June 2020 survey of 1,600 teachers and school leaders by the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) echoed these findings and found an increase in extreme levels of fatigue, anxiety, and stress among teachers in the province. The study showed a direct link between experiences of stress and the burden of managing health and safety protocols and preventing student infection.[13]

Relatedly, a May 2020 survey of 1,327 Canadian teachers completed by researchers from the University of Winnipeg found that teachers experienced high levels of concern and increased awareness of the vulnerable students in their classrooms, which caused distress and prompted creative and increased efforts to provide instruction and materials to meet students' needs. The survey also found that increased demands on education workers to teach virtually was a key stressor.[14]

In addition, the survey results showed a relationship between lack of resources, increased demands, and burnout during the pandemic.[15]

In their explanation, the researchers define burnout as a progressive process characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and feelings of inefficacy, and loss of sense of accomplishment.[16] The researchers describe the best way to mitigate teacher stress and burnout is to provide selected resources, decrease professional demands,[17] and establish support from administrators and coworkers.[18]

The researchers also suggest that effective strategies should be specific and localized, and require varied levels of educational and societal support.[19]

Yet as CTF/FCE President Shelley L. Morse stated during 2020, "educators are front line workers without front line protection."[20] Educational researchers have also stressed the importance of teachers as frontline workers.[21] As such, understanding the professional experiences of education workers during the pandemic can potentially leverage advocacy and supportive action for meaningful change.

Continuing Research on Teacher Mental Health: Teachers' Voices

The CTF/FCE has continued to document changes in the teaching profession in Canada and as a result of the pandemic to support localized advocacy and act as the national voice for teachers and education workers. In this work, in June 2020 the CTF/FCE conducted a national survey with over 15,000 completed teacher responses documenting the concerning mental health trends for teachers and students in the *CTF/FCE Canadian Teachers Responding to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) - Pandemic Research Study Mental Health Report.* In October 2020, the CTF/FCE Research and Professional Learning (RPL) team conducted a follow-up "pulse style" quantitative survey that resulted in three national reports:

- *Teacher Mental Health Check-in Survey: Pandemic Research Report*
- *Teacher Mental Health Check-in Survey: Black, Indigenous, Teachers of Colour, and 2SLGBTQ+ Segment Report*
- *Teacher Mental Health Check-in Survey: Teaching Modalities Segment Report*

The results of these reports indicate that there is dire need for timely, wide-reaching, and continued support to alleviate the deteriorating mental health of Canadian public-school teachers caused in part by increased workload, uncertainty, and inadequate support from school, boards/districts, and Ministry leadership. The *But at what cost? Teacher mental health and well-being during COVID-19* report has gathered the experiences of teachers and education workers from across the country to better understand their concerns. These experiences describe connections between workload, changes to practice and pedagogy, uptake of digital technologies, and teachers' mental health and well-being. They also describe the complex spheres of influence that orbit around teachers' professional expectations, sense of identity, and outlook on the profession. From the insights of the one-on-one interviews that developed these themes, the report also provides localized, immediate, ongoing, and prolonged recommendations for the sustained well-being of public education teachers.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made in the October 2020 *CTF/FCE Canadian Teachers Responding to Coronavirus (COVID 19) Pandemic Research Study Mental Health Report:*

- Offer immediate and ongoing emotional and mental health support to teachers, education workers, and students.
- Increase funding for teacher and student mental health services.
- Develop new mental health resources to address impacts of the pandemic, including trauma informed resources.
- Adjust workload expectations.
- Provide clear directions with proper communication from administration, boards, and Ministries.

The following recommendations were made in the November 2020 *Mental Health Check-in Survey: Pandemic Research Report:*

- Make mental health and well-being a priority: shift expectations around working extensively outside of contract hours.
- Increase visibility and ease of access for teacher mental health resources.
- Balance demands and resources in current teaching contexts. For example, while there is a need in many contexts for additional student supervision and time spent on non-teaching tasks, prioritize time for teacher preparation and assessment by adding people power.
- Maintain the same health and safety guidelines that are utilized outside of schools, in schools and classrooms, e.g., masks and proper physical distancing.
- Increase funding for decreased classroom sizes that adhere to health and safety protocols.
- Create long-term policy and procedures to support teachers' mental health and well-being at school, board, and Ministry levels, especially for pandemic or crisis teaching environments.
- Listen to teachers' experiences, and recognize the long-term, cumulative effects of being a front-line education worker in the care economy.

Based on our findings from the qualitative interviews, we continue to advocate for the above, and add the following:

- The foundation of support teachers desperately need must be strengthened to ensure that excessive workload and lack of mental health and wellness support does not continue to burden teachers.
- Much more planning and deliberate attention to effective pedagogies should be provided so that teachers can maintain quality instruction during a global pandemic and maintain both home and school-based learning opportunities mediated through technology.
- Students require ongoing school support systems that have dwindled due to the onset of the pandemic.
- While there are resources to which teachers can turn to and purchase for assistance (for example Teachers Pay Teachers), the scale of difficulty to adjust to in-person, online and hybrid educational contexts not only surpasses their capacities, but increases their mental, physical, and financial burdens. Teachers require educational infrastructure that supports their pedagogical approaches to student success.

- Shift pedagogical focus towards relationship building, connection, and the engagement process to create a healthier learning environment for both teachers and students during the pandemic.
- Eliminate unpredictability and provide advance notice about policy and procedural changes and vaccinations, when possible. Communicate these changes in a respectful manner through proper professional channels, not through social media.
- Check-in with teachers and listen with intent to ensure adequate support.
- Provide in-school space(s) for teachers to communicate and decompress to process the impact from the pandemic.
- Provide pedagogical guidance, resources, and professional development to manage newfound obstacles related to online learning, student engagement, and trauma-informed teaching.



Research Design and Methods

As concerns surrounding mental health and well-being increase, continued research is needed to track and better understand the mental and emotional hazards education workers experience as a part of teaching through a global health crisis. To gain a richer understanding of teachers' experiences, this study continues CTF/FCE's evidence-based advocacy work of being the national voice for the teaching profession. Yet, it also responds to its Member and Associate Organizations' needs, such as the Alberta Teachers' Association's call to conduct in-depth research about teacher emotional and mental health to define recommendations for improvement.[22]

This qualitive research builds on the CTF/FCE's June and October 2020 pan-Canadian pandemic research studies to learn more about the connections between workload, changes to practice and pedagogy, digital technologies, and mental health and well-being. In the October survey, the RPL team asked teachers if they were willing to be contacted for a qualitative follow-up interview. This was with the goal of pairing the quantitative data from the survey with teacher narratives.

Research Question:

What are teachers' day-to-day realities living and working in the COVID-19 pandemic?

In January 2021, our research team began recruiting participants using strategic representative stratified sampling[23,24] of the 2200 teachers who provided contact information through the October 2020 check-in survey. We selected and sent invitation letters to 110 teachers who were recruited from CTF/FCE's 18 Member and Associate Organizations in English and French (95 English, 15 French). Participation in the interview process was confidential and completely voluntarily. To acknowledge and compensate teachers for their time, all interviewees were given a $20 electronic gift card to Indigo Books and Music. Quotations from French interviews in this report have been translated to English by CTF/FCE translators.

Semi-structured interview questions were developed out of findings from the *CTF/FCE Teacher Mental Health Check-in* survey results. The 30–45-minute open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted in both official languages from February 20 – April 4, 2021. With a total of 32 completed interviews, we garnered close to 9 hours of audio and 400 pages of transcribed conversations. Teachers had the chance to provide a follow-up written reflection, of which we received two follow-up responses.

The CTF/FCE used a secure in-house videoconferencing platform to conduct interviews. The interviews were audio recorded and saved in a password-protected file that only the research team had access to. The audio was transcribed through a trusted Canadian transcription company, Transcription Heroes, based in Toronto, Ontario. Participants were informed that the interview data would remain confidential, and any identifying data would be anonymized in the transcripts and reporting to protect their privacy. All participants were reminded throughout the process that they can refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time, and that refusal or withdrawal would not affect them negatively in any way. Participants who agreed to take part in the study signed a consent form acknowledging that they had read the letter of information and that they understood and agreed to the terms of the study. Once all data was collected and transcribed, data analysis ensued. During the data analysis process, our team developed an iterative

thematic codebook, and coded transcripts using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. Throughout coding, the RPL team cross-checked their analysis regularly to ensure intercoder reliability.[25]

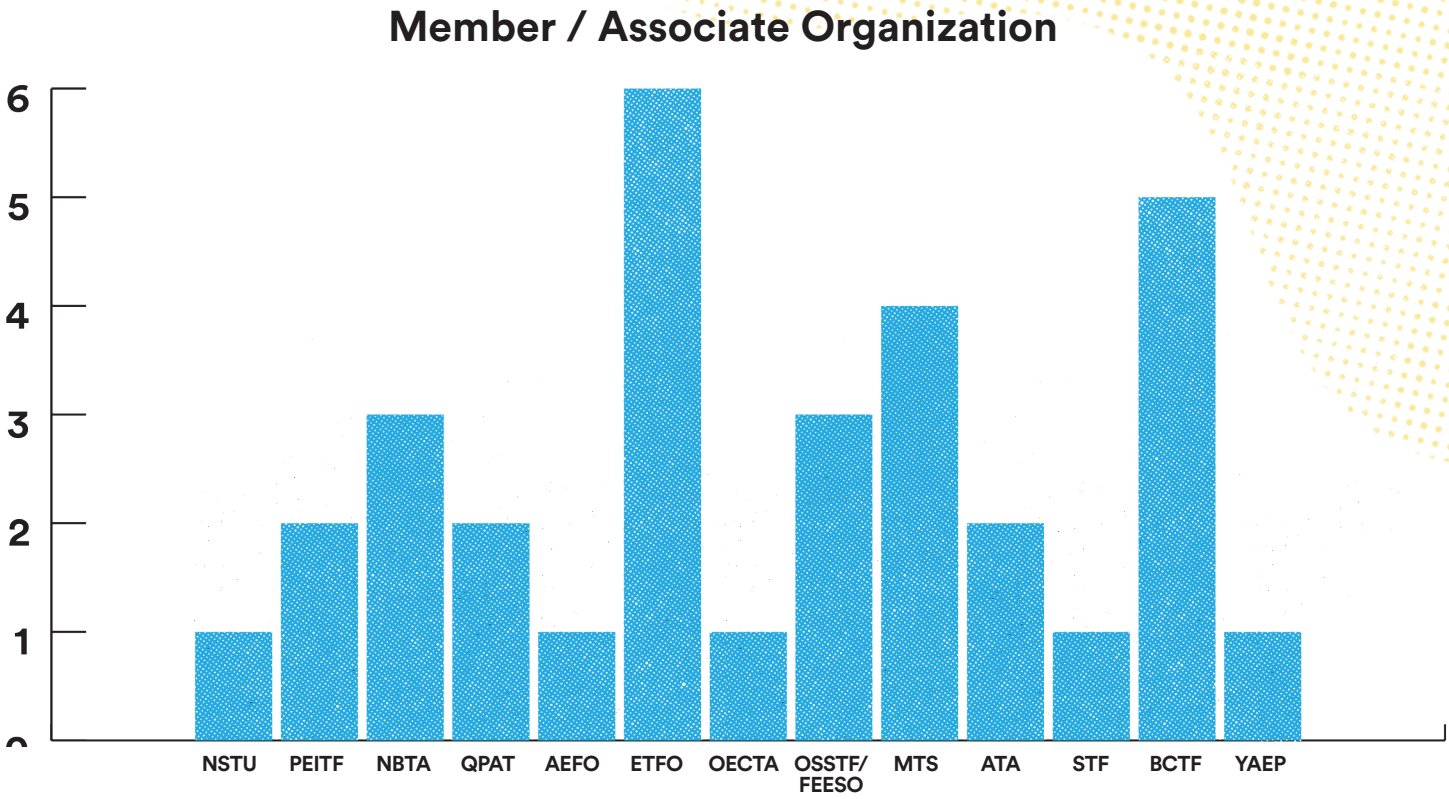


Figure 1. Participant Member/Associate Organization distribution

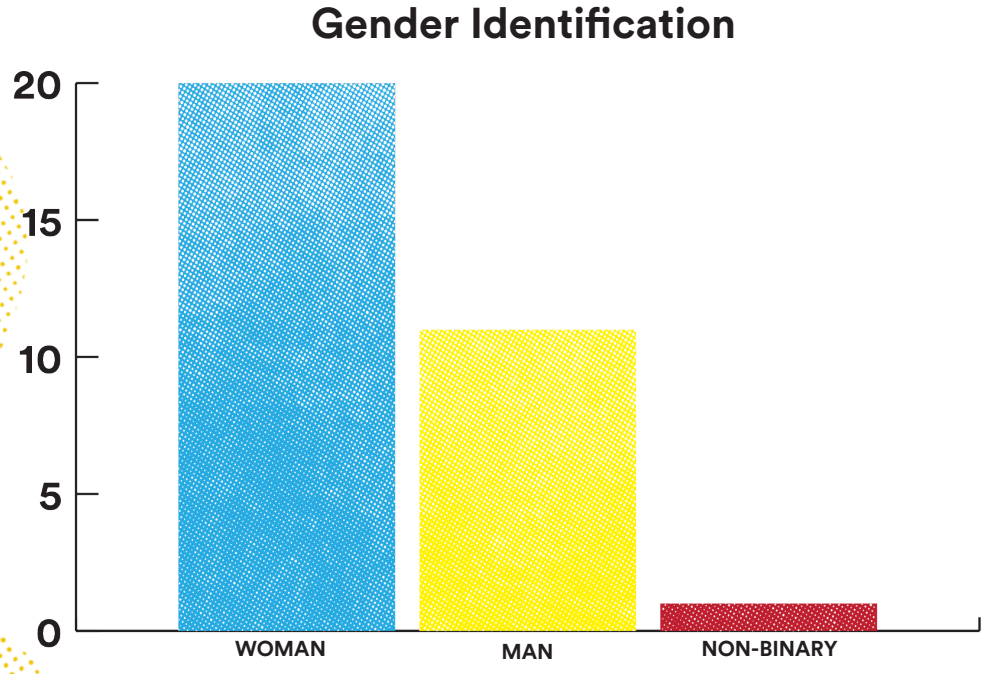


Figure 2. Participant self-identified gender distribution

Participant demographics

Figure 1 shows the distribution of teacher participants across Member and Associate Organizations. As illustrated in Figure 2, 62.5% of teachers self-identified as women, 34% as men, and 3% as gender non-binary.

The majority of participants were full-time education workers (87.5%), some taught part-time (e.g., Long Term Occasional, Term Contract) (6.2%), and others were daily contract teachers (6.2%) (e.g., Supply, Substitute, Daily Occasional) (Figure 3).

Participants worked with Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12 students. The teaching experience of participants ranged from 1 year to over 30 years of experience (Figure 4). Teachers taught in a range of educational contexts. Most continued to teach in-person (55%), with just over a third having some online teaching experiences (34%), and a small portion having to teach in a hybrid context (online and in-person) (12%) (Figure 5).

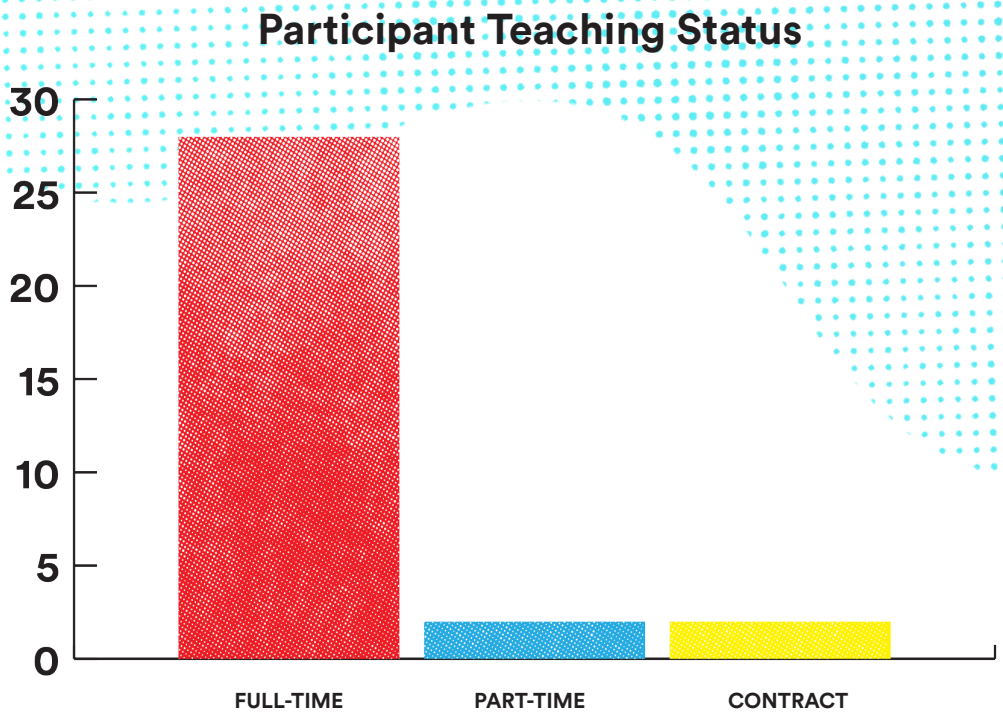


Figure 3. Participant teaching assignment distribution

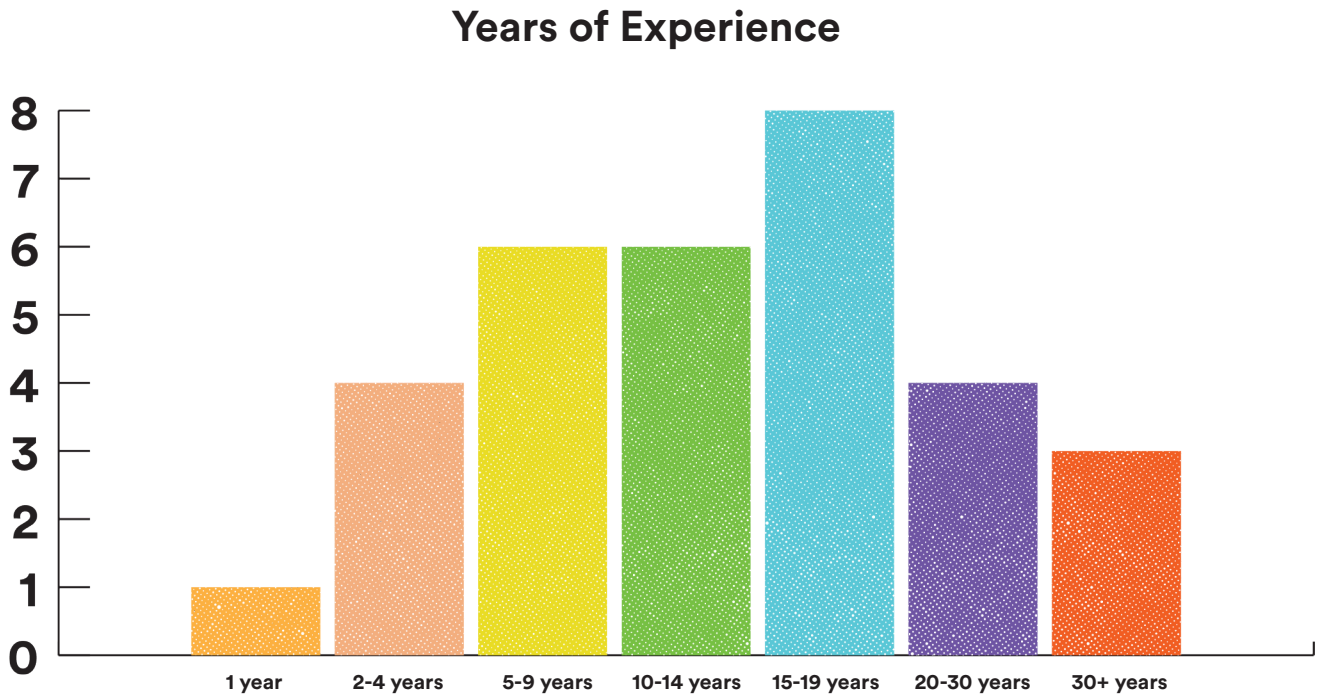


Figure 4. Participant years of teaching experience distribution

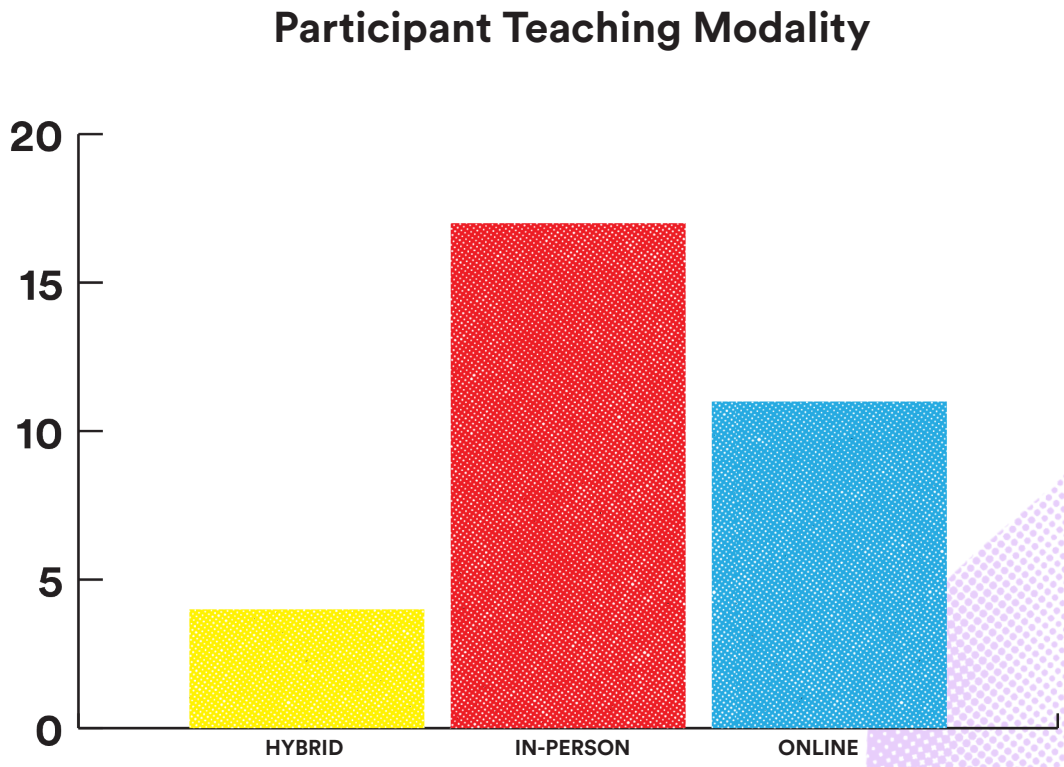


Figure 5. Modality participant distribution

Thematic Analysis

Thematic interpretation and analysis occurred through several stages. After the interviews were transcribed, we analyzed interview transcription data developing themes that emerged from narratives. In this stage six themes from teacher mental health narratives emerged (Figure 6). These emergent themes from teachers' narratives aligned and reinforced much the quantitative findings from the October 2020 CTF/FCE Teacher Mental Health Check-in survey. In working with these six themes, we collapsed them into three overarching thematic categories that frame the major sections of this report: workload, pedagogy, and the profession.

These three aspects, although discussed as separate entities in the written analysis, overlapped and were interconnected throughout the interviews. Technology, communication, and connection remain important themes, but have been interpreted through close analytical reading of the narratives as factors that inflect and influence the three major aspects of teachers' experiences.

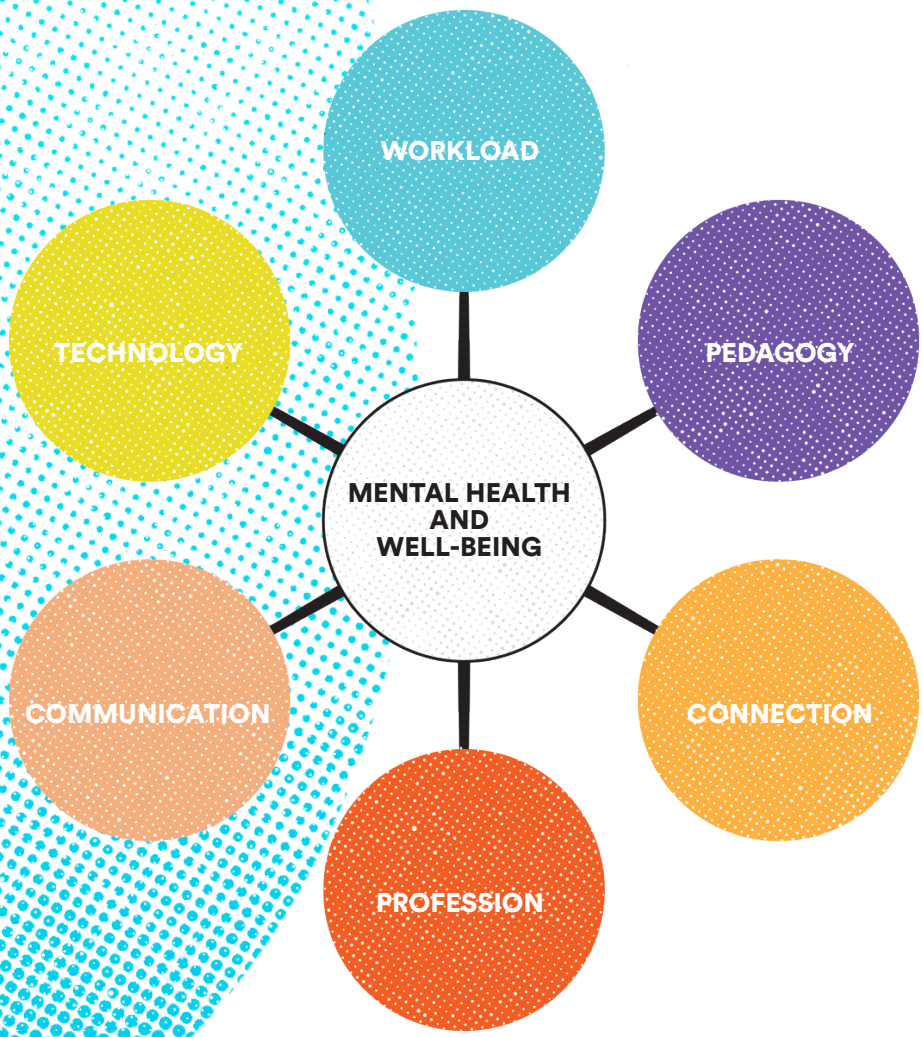
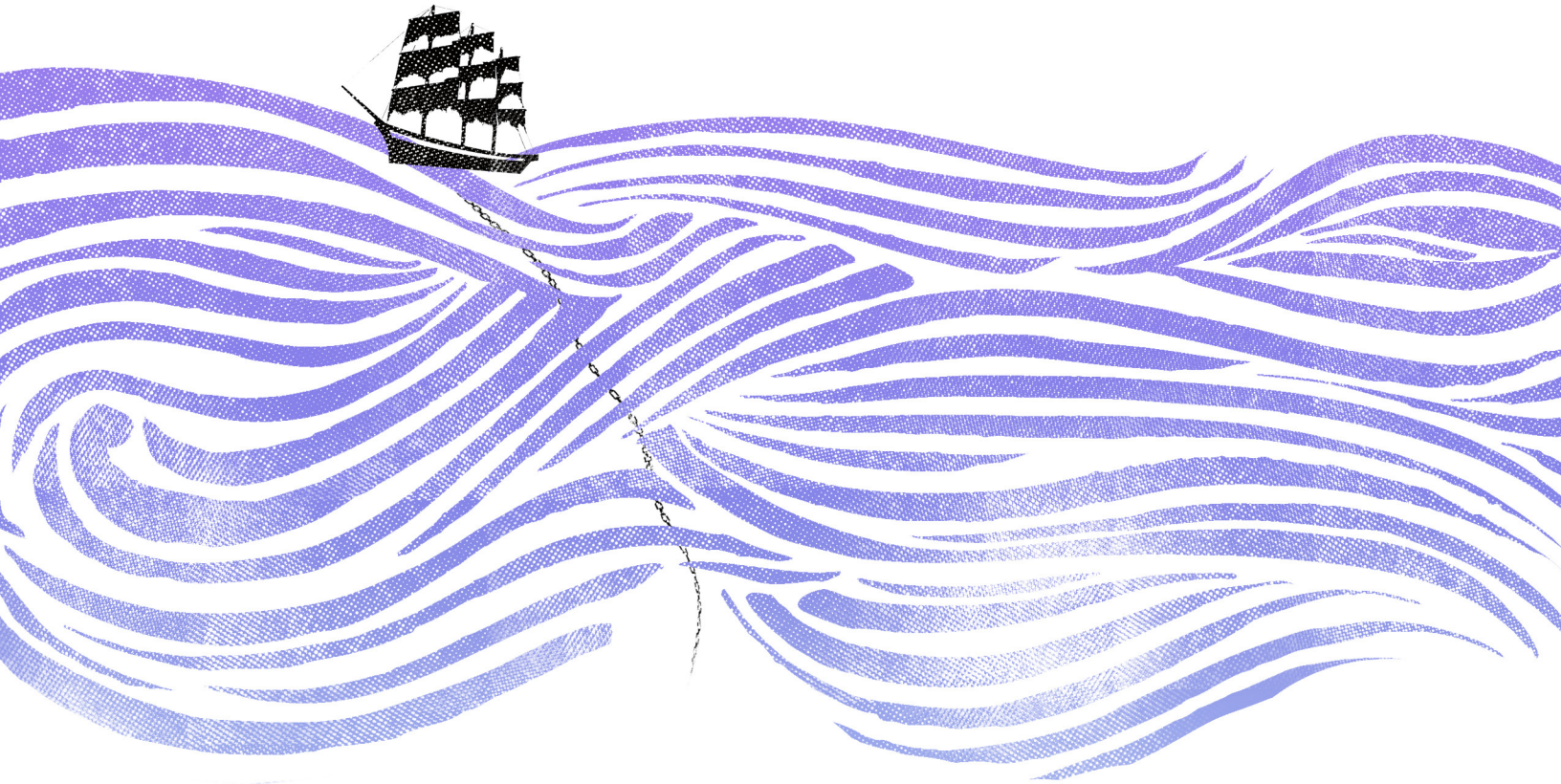
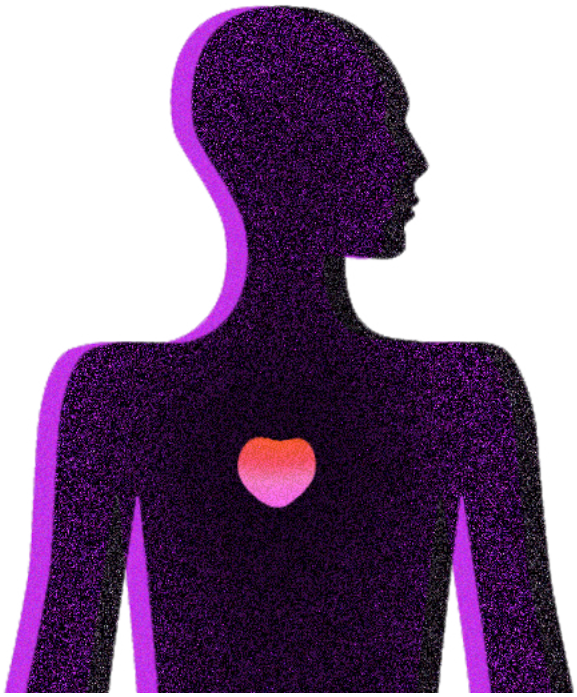


Figure 6. Initial coded themes



Educating Through a Pandemic: Qualitative Analysis



Written on the Body: The Anatomy of Workload

It just feels like it's been piled on piled on piled on or there's more and more and more and it's like well, how much more can we take? How much more can we do, how much more can we still change [...] And we always figure it out, but at what cost?
(QPAT, secondary, 1)



For teachers who participated in this study, 97% stated they experienced increased physical, mental, and emotional workload, and job demands during the 2020-2021 school year. Teachers indicated that their workload increases were primarily in terms of classroom preparation, planning, and reporting (87.5%), increased mental and emotional workload related to uncertainty (69%), student supervision and emotional support (59%), managing COVID-19 health and safety protocols (56%), communicating with parents, colleagues, and students (53%), troubleshooting technical difficulties (25%), and creating, finding, or purchasing resources and materials (25%) (Figure 7). In speaking with educators about their workload during the 2020-2021 school year, teachers shared how the weight of these added tasks and changes diminished their psychological, emotional, and physiological health and well-being. As one experienced teacher put it, "the workload has been overwhelming, crushing, unsustainable" (ETFO, elementary, 38).

The "load" of workload appears in the psychological weight of constantly being mindful of health and safety for themselves and their students; of anticipating, planning, and responding to unpredictable and continual changes. The burden of workload also appears in the emotional weight

of worry and concern over the success and well-being of students in their care along with teachers' personal lives and responsibilities. This physically manifested through the cumulative exhaustion teachers experienced; in their acknowledgement of physical signs of stress like weight loss and sleeplessness, and hoarse voices from teaching through masks or stiffness from teaching online and working on screen for 12-14 hours a day. These and many other examples, detailed more fully below, show an *anatomy of workload* in the impacts it carried for teachers' mental health and well-being.

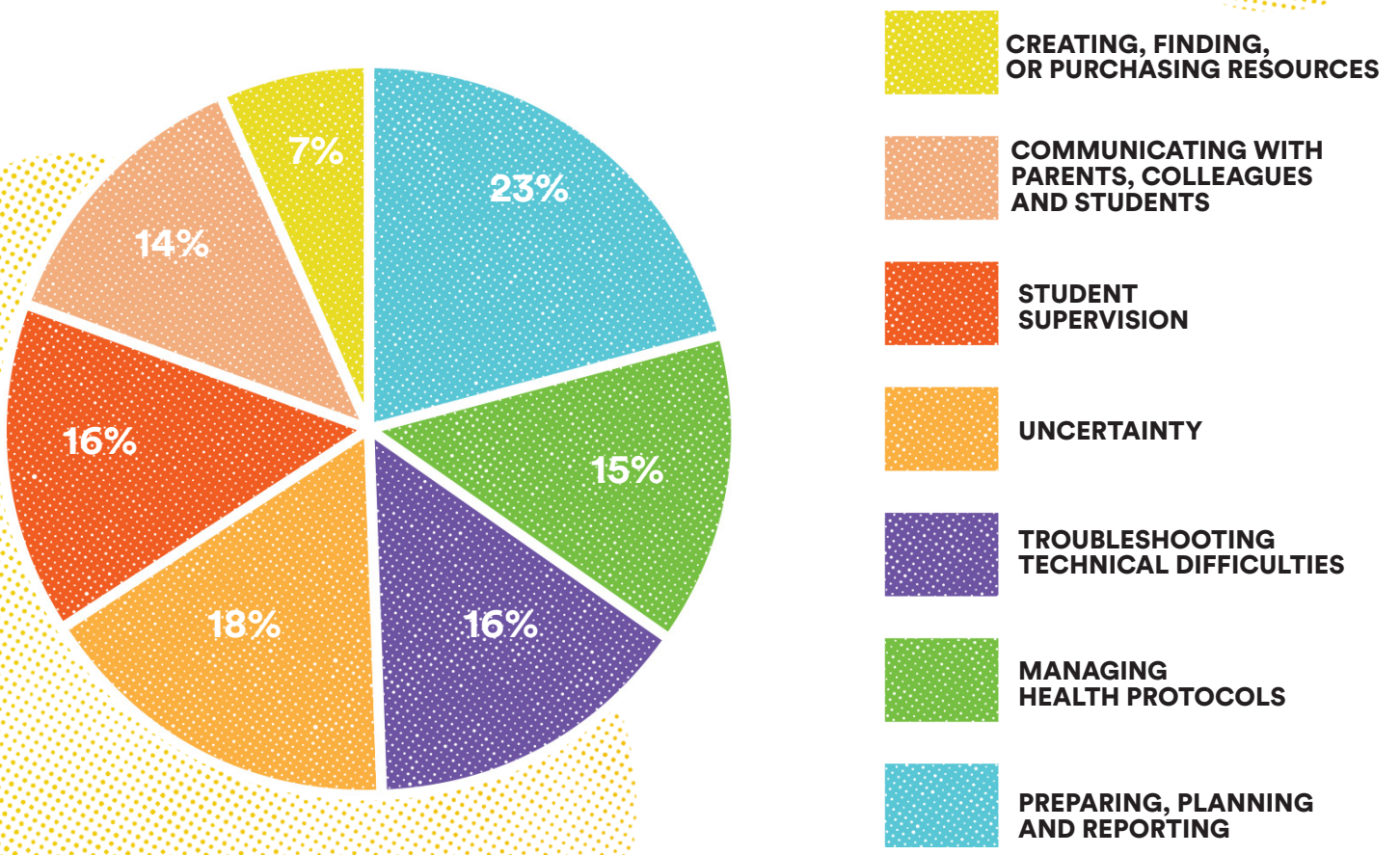


Figure 7. Workload coding breakdown

Head Space: Psychological Load

...this is my [30+] year teaching, and it should be a breeze. And, unfortunately, I'm not enjoying this year and last year because I feel like it's my first year teaching. And I'm sure you've heard that before, but I'm telling you now, I've taught through a lot, including pregnancies, broken bones, family trauma, I've taught through a lot, but this trumps them all. And the worst thing is, it's not something that you can control.
(ATA, elementary, 12)

Psychological Weight: Uncertainty and Unpredictability

Teachers need time to prepare, organize, and plan, as they are tasked with preparing young people with the skills and knowledge for the future. In more specific ways, this preparation time is important for strong curriculum implementation, pedagogical creativity, and professional satisfaction. In the 2020-2021 school year, the COVID-19 pandemic siphoned teachers' time, and their ability to plan and prepare for what was ahead became strained, shorted, or non-existent. We asked teachers about their 2020-2021 workload, and many discussed a sense of exhaustion, anxiety, and frustration with the continual changes to their professional circumstances that diminished their ability to plan and prepare. An experienced teacher from QPAT explained:



Normally as a teacher we – there's a lot of predictability you know, like school years like yes, the kids change, but the school year doesn't change that much. And we have a calendar; we know exactly what we need to do and prepare for. So, this year it's been all out the window because even the protocols have changed so much. Like it's every time they have a press conference for our province we are on pins and needles because we don't know what's going to be the change.
(QPAT, secondary, 13)

Another secondary teacher from Manitoba described a similar feeling as they explained having the time to plan and prepare in the morning was "sacred" to them. Teaching during the 2020-2021 school year often disrupted that time. The teacher described that, "the sacredness that I wanted, to feel mentally and materially and psychologically prepared often didn't happen" this year for them (MTS, elementary, 6).

The inability to plan and prepare meant teachers frantically attempted to get their classroom assignments, delivery methods, content, and resources organized in unmeetable timelines. Many teachers confided that they spent extra hours planning, organizing, and preparing outside of their normal work hours on evenings and weekends. The elementary teacher from MTS further admitted: "time as a full-time teacher is so valuable and so precious and you get so little of it done in the teaching hours that you have to – you have to spend so much more extra time in your time that's not really supposed to be spent working, but you have to do it in order to stay on top of things. It's the only way, really." (6)

The added pandemic uncertainty during the school year also left many teachers continuing to struggle to adequately prepare, and only increased anxieties. As the QPAT teacher above explains, this often was because changes happened frequently, randomly, and often without warning. In some Canadian regions, unpredictable and frequent public health status changes in local communities, and by extension in schools, also made planning and preparation difficult, if not impossible. It meant teachers carried the psychological load of consistently being responsive and needing to anticipate these changes. A primary teacher from NBTA reflected on the series of questions that continued to run in her mind, demonstrating the constant mental awareness education workers experienced:

> **Are we safe? How safe are we? And what indicators do you use to move us from this zone to that zone? And not having that clarity and that information…So every day we're going to work and you're thinking is this the day? Is this the day, after the kids have left, that they're going to tell us that we're in lockdown and we are teaching from home now for the next two weeks and we have nothing to teach at home?**
>
> (NBTA, elementary, 44).

Another elementary teacher from ETFO described the constant uncertainty as the psychological load of "being mindful of the…what do you call it, the potential for lockdown" or other changes to their professional circumstances (ETFO, elementary, 38). Similarly, an NBTA secondary teacher offered: "we have this constant…feeling of unease of what's going to be sprung on us next" (25).

The continual mindfulness and being on guard for potential major changes to their teaching circumstances, that would often occur without warning, carried a significant toll for teachers' mental health and well-being. Indeed, even the OECD recently reported "it has become abundantly clear how important it is during a pandemic to ensure reliability and predictability of educational services."[26] This predictability is not simply for students and parent/guardians, but for education workers as well. The education workers we spoke with described the exhaustion and stress of carrying the psychological weight of this "constant anticipation." A secondary teacher from YAEP explained:

We all were so bloody exhausted by a year of everything being different all the time. And I think that's the biggest thing is that it's sort of the constant changes. So, now, we're all super stressed out because we're told we're going back full-time, but we don't know when or what that's supposed to look like.
(YAEP, secondary, 16)

Changes were very much beyond teachers' control and added a layer of psychological weight to their work. The results from the October 2020 *CTF/FCE Teacher Mental Health Check- in Survey* report showed that one of the worst points of frustration for teachers was the "continual shifts to my work environment,"with 32% noting this was "severely frustrating." The enacted changes varied widely, but all shifts in expectations forced teachers to take on added workload in order to be adaptive to the COVID-19 health and safety measures for students, themselves, and other staff.

As the school year progressed, some teachers became more able to find ways to prepare, even as contexts changed around them. Even though teachers took extra time to prepare materials for anticipated shifts in schooling delivery, sometimes their extra precautions ended up being superfluous, as contexts shifted yet again, leaving their bought and prepared materials unusable for the time being. As one teacher from PEITF described:

> **I transferred almost everything I was doing in class onto the Google Classroom platform because we are being asked to teach this year as if we could go back to online teaching at anytime during the school year. Consequently, a lot of time was spent, is being spent each week to try to keep Google Classroom up to date while teaching in class**
>
> (PEITF, secondary, 2)

Another teacher in Ontario provided:

> **In November I was like, OK, so what are the what ifs, and I'm like, I'm going to make... just-in-case bags. So, we, I got Ziplock bags and we made math manipulatives, so that they could have and take and use at home, that went in. I made homemade Rekenreks, so the kids would have a Rekenrek, so that they could do those math things at home. I started putting together packages and notebooks and just things, and then [...] they tell us on the 21st that we are off, I'd already sent my kids with a just in case bag with enough stuff for three weeks, thinking that.**
>
> (ETFO, elementary, 39)

Psychological Weight: Health and Safety mindfulness

For teachers and education workers that remained in the school buildings during the pandemic, enhanced health and safety protocols became part of their mandated workload. Across the country, teachers described how enacting, maintaining, and policing COVID-19 health and safety protocols was a significant added element to their already strained and over-burdened workloads during the 2020-2021 school year.

For example, a QPAT secondary teacher succinctly explained:

> **What's difficult about the time that we're in right now, it's always being mindful of the virus and PPE [Personal Protective Equipment] and the safety protocols. So, on top of what we normally do as a teacher so, like planning our lessons and correcting and doing activities with the students, we're very mindful of it's always on our brain [...] So, it's difficult because there's a lot being added onto our plates which we have to be mindful of. Not to protect ourselves, we've got to protect our own students as well.**
>
> (QPAT, secondary, 13)

Yet the specifics of protocols, how they were implemented, and expectations for teachers, students, and other education workers in maintaining these protocols varied widely and changed throughout the course of the school year. A teacher support specialist described that even schools within their district were "all dealing with it very differently," which made their job to safely enter different schools to support and collaborate with teachers a difficult task, as they needed to juggle multiple protocols and safety regulations (MTS, program specialist, 8). The variety of safety protocols and policies teachers were confronted with across schools, districts, and the country also meant teachers described a variety of experiences of taking on and adapting to these protocols as part of their workload. What was consistent across the interview data was the psychological weight of vigilance and policing that came with these protocols as a new and added part of their new "invisible" workload.

A secondary teacher from PEITF described:

Some protocols were detailed in the operational plan at the start of the year, but as restrictions change at the provincial level, we end up with new protocols. It's a lot to manage with students. I finish and start my classes five minutes late each time, I teach secondary, so that the students can disinfect.

(PEITF, secondary, 2)

An Ontario teacher lamented that it is the "minutiae of decision making [that] is exhausting" (ETFO, elementary, 15), where an elementary teacher from BCTF teaching in-person provided this detailed example of what this looked like in practice:

> **[If a student] needs to be picked up early there's a completely different process that I usually – there's more planning on my end, so I have to get the kid ready and packaged and up to the office. Then the parent has to come and call the office to get the office to send the child out of the building. And usually, every time a parent says they want to pick up a child early I have to go through that process and explain it to them for each family.** (5)

It was the "unprecedentedness" of the pandemic and the changes to education to respond to the health crisis that weighed so heavily on teachers – and on us all. But teachers and education workers carried added psychological burdens of taking on health and safety mindfulness for all students in their care as part of their workloads. This meant figuring out "completely different processes," as the teacher explained above, from the new protocols and routines that support the education system. Another teacher from British Columbia described the effects thus:

> **I am finding that I'm just so much more stressed and anxious, and those anxieties I have about work come home with me much more. You know, I'll come home and then I'm replaying and I'm, like, when I clean the desks, did I clean that one that the kid had left his pencil case on and came back for? Or did I just stand there and tell him to take his pencil case and then not spray it? Like, the stresses of tiny things like that, and then, I get a letter twice a week probably saying that I've potentially been exposed to COVID-19, but not to worry about it…**
>
> (BCTF, secondary, 9)

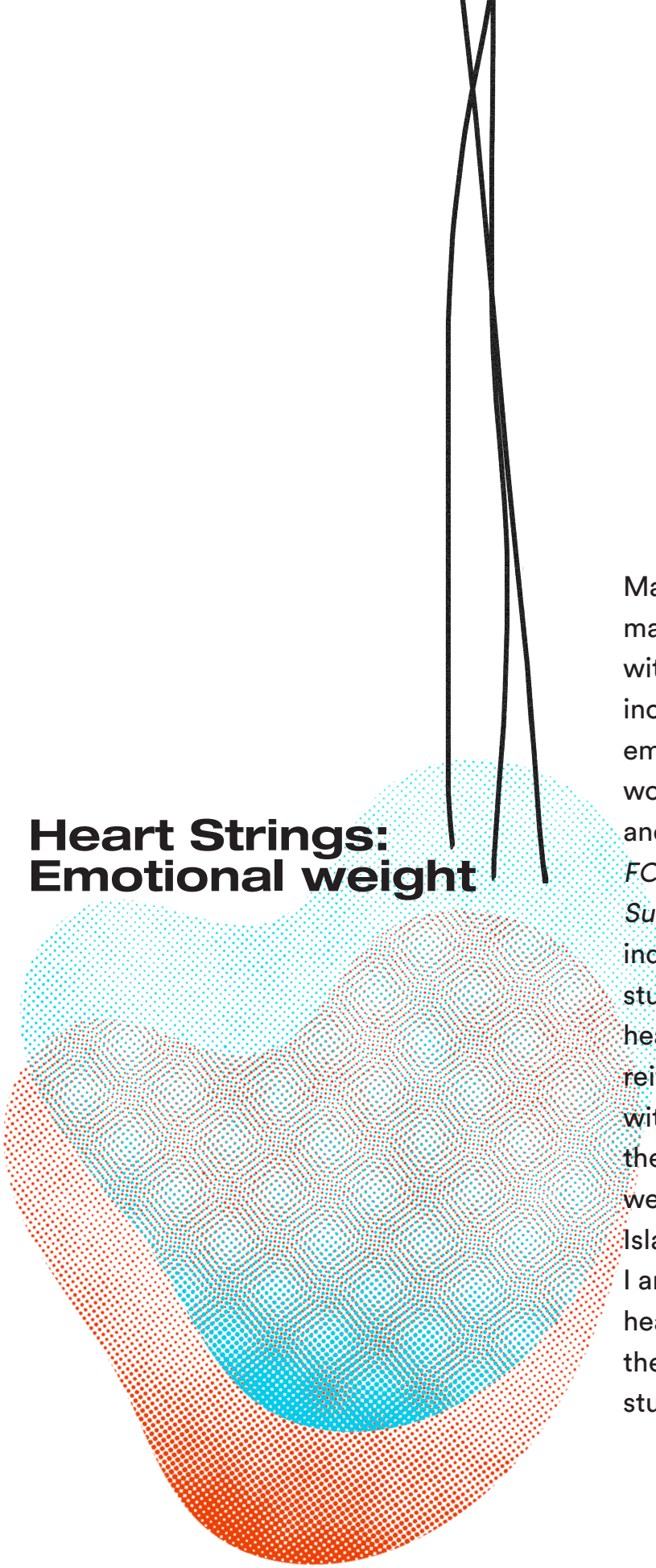
Figuring out these processes was also deeply significant for education workers who experienced public health lockdowns and emergency remote online teaching. Many teachers were forced to navigate teaching from their homes and over online platforms for the first time, often while other family members were also at home. A secondary teacher from Ontario explained:

> **I feel like the most stressful for me is just the mental load. I can't seem to compartmentalize anything so, you know, I'll start thinking about a lesson that I want to put together and then I'm like oh my gosh, it's lunchtime so, I'm getting my kids lunch. I'm home with my daughter during the day and then my husband works downstairs. And then you know, back to thinking about the lesson, I'm like oh you know what, I should probably go and put that load of laundry in before because (child) needs you know, her – the only pair of socks that works with her shoes at school to be washed. So, that part I find the other night I had to put her laundry again because again, she's very specific. And I had texted my husband can you remind me to flip the laundry…I just have those moments of oh my God, is this never going to end? And I am a very calm person, but I'm calm, calm, calm, and then there's this like build-up happening until it's just this massive explosion, always happens with my kids. And I feel that because I'm like well, how can I be so calm with my students, they're doing ridiculous things right now, and I'm not shouting at them. And it's like this feeling in my chest of I know I can breathe, I know it's fine, I know – nothing pandemic related, like I'm not scared I'm going to get something. I just get this feeling of OK; I need to go outside and take this deep breath. Kind of like a panic attack, but I don't know if that would be the label for it.**
>
> (OECTA, secondary, 22)

Not only were teachers and education workers taking on the added mental load of separating work from home, the remote learning environment meant they also took on the mental load of keeping track of their students who were also at home. This teacher discussed how juggling working from home, their family, spouse, and children have been leading to emotional and physical issues such as pent-up frustration being taken out on their family members, and heightened anxiety to the point of feeling like they were having panic attacks. The effects of multitasking and always being "on" while teaching virtually, but not feeling that energy reciprocated, was explained by an elementary teacher from rural Manitoba:

> **It felt like putting – I was putting a lot of stuff out there, a lot of – but hardly getting anything back, and that I found incredibly stressful. And then the division wanting me to also show what was I doing. Well, I was reaching out, I was reaching out, but I can't do much else if they don't give me stuff back.**
> (MTS, elementary, 6).

This teacher describes how constantly putting effort into connecting with students for online teaching, while being hypervigilant about their level of engagement with the work, was stressful. Since they were also being asked by their employer to "show their work," the inability to control students' level of engagement despite their efforts, added further stress to an already tense environment. While online teaching will be further discussed in the pedagogy section, this example shows how the switch to virtual learning added different psychological stressors for education workers than in-person teaching. Although health and safety protocols and the policing of those protocols did not exist in virtual spaces, the psychological stress of student disengagement, and /or employer demands to record and justify one's work weighed heavily on teachers' minds.

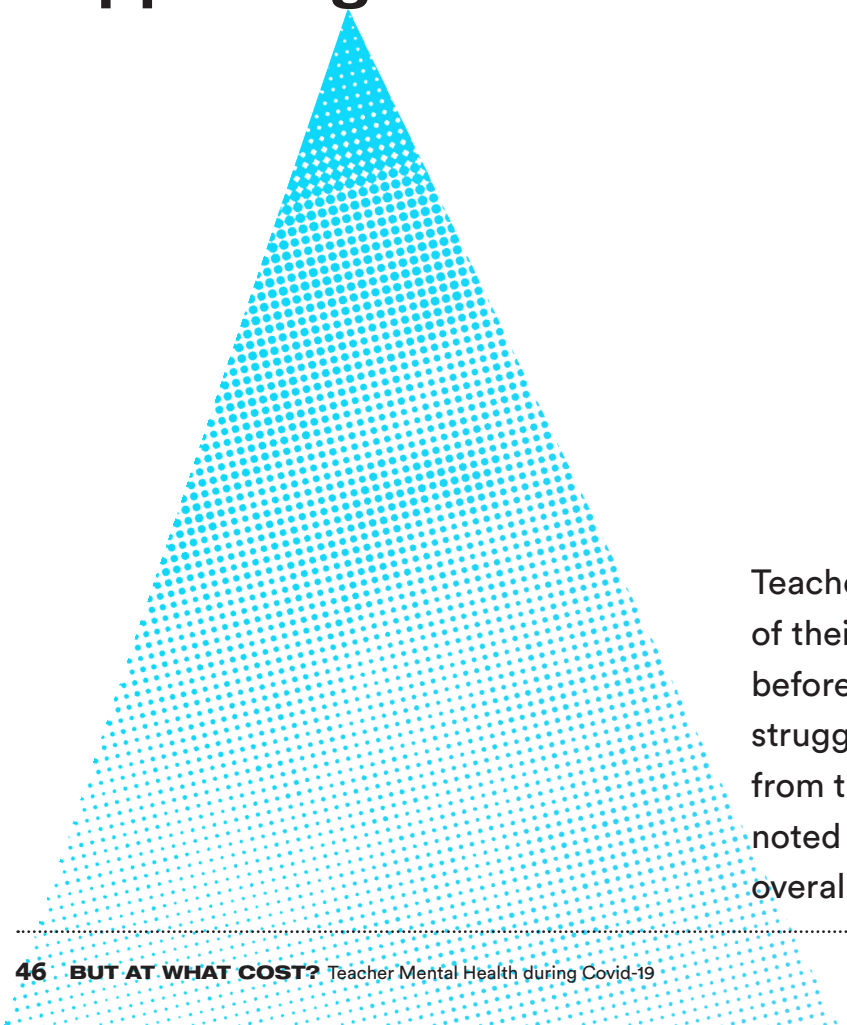


Heart Strings: Emotional weight

A big part of teaching is psychological and, you know, emotional support. […] And you can't do that over distance.
(MTS, elementary, 6)

Many teachers described that establishing, maintaining, and supporting connections with students were not only psychological increases in their workload, but powerfully emotional as well. Teachers and education workers consistently spoke of their worry and concern for their students. In the *CTF/FCE Teacher Mental Health Check-in Survey*, 38% of teachers who participated indicated "providing emotional support for students," "greatly affected" their emotional health. As we spoke to teachers directly, they reiterated the importance of connections with their students as well as the concern they carried for their health, success, and well-being. A teacher in Prince Edward Island admitted, for instance, "Basically I am concerned about the students, the health of the students, the physical health of the students, and the mental health of the students as well" (PEITF, secondary, 2).

Emotional weight: Supporting students



Supporting students on their own journeys to navigate the host of unpredictable changes to schooling became a significant emotional load. A BCTF teacher succinctly stated, "public safety is – it's an emotional stress that I didn't realize I would feel" (BCTF, secondary, 9). An elementary teacher from NBTA provided a poignant example relating the difficulty of "telling [students] from the get-go, we can't hug each other this year":

> **And I mean not that I'm constantly hugging my students, I'm not. But it's just that level of connection and kids who, "I want to hold your hand madam, but I know I'm not allowed" just – that really rips at your heart strings when you're working with really young kids and I mean there's lots of children who that's the hug that they get is the hug they get from their teacher that's the hug they get for their day.** (NBTA, elementary, 44)

Teachers and education workers spoke of their concerns for their students often before their spoke of their own personal struggles. In discussing emergent themes from the qualitative interview, the RPL team noted a consistent thread of teachers being overall less inclined to speak about their own

emotional health than their concern for their students. As one teacher noted, “we’re there for the kids and that’s what’s it’s all about is the kids” (ETFO, elementary, 14). At the same time, this desire to support and connect with students, particularly because of their keen awareness of students’ needs, often became what an ATA teacher described as “an emotional burden” (ATA, secondary, 29). An education worker from New Brunswick provided an example of such feeling admitting:

This year more than any other year, I’ve doubted myself sometimes more than I have before. And I’ve worked harder this year than I’ve worked in a lot of other years. And why is that? I don’t know. I don’t know if it’s – I think part of it’s just trying to make sure that my students are happy at school and that it’s a happy place for them and that it seems normal. And just trying to reassure them that everything’s going to be OK, even when we don’t know if it is. And just trying to be their support person and deal with what they’re coming to school with, emotionally.

(NBTA, elementary, 44)

Teachers and education workers spoke a lot of their concerns over the effects of the pandemic on students as they witnessed their students' stress, anxiety, and burnout. An OECTA teacher explained:

> **I can see some effects of burnout in some of my students. There are a few notable ones who at the start of the year, were really keen, really gung-ho [sic] always responding in our check-ins, and now are slow to respond, don't respond, have trouble focusing during the check-ins or need repeating of statements or questions to them. So I can start to see it in some of those, especially the higher achiever ones who started off the year really engaged.** (OECTA, elementary, 26)

Another teacher from ETFO echoed this experience, noting:

> **I've noticed kids... The kids are just sort of sitting there and they sort of stare off into space. My co-worker is a grade one teacher, one of my girlfriends at the same school, has said grade one kids are usually very much like "I like school". Most of her class, "I hate this. I don't like this." So there's that mentality of just like eh, they just sort of sit there. They won't pick up their pencil, they're just sort of bored. We teach kids it's good to learn to be bored, which is fine. That only goes so far.** (ETFO, elementary, 27)

Emotional weight: Lack of control

Another aspect of this emotional load teachers discussed was the difficulty and often sheer inability to change the circumstances and situations to support students, colleagues, or even themselves emotionally and socially. Speaking about the emotional and social effects of the pandemic on students, a teacher in British Columbia provided an example:

> **Even their social groups at lunchtime and things are all gone or changed so much, they're unrecognizable. So, kids who had support systems before have lost them, and kids who might have been looking to build support systems can't see where they would be and can't find them"**
> (BCTF, secondary, 9)

The emotional weight also manifested in difficult moments between colleagues. As an NBTA teacher described, "And in the staff that I work with, I have never seen so many people cry at work" (NBTA, secondary, 43). Even more difficult was the inability to comfort them: "You see somebody that's visibly upset and you're sitting there, both of you, wearing masks and all you want to do is hug that person and comfort them and you feel like it's just – you just can't give each other the support that you feel that you should" (NBTA, elementary, 44). Teachers

also provided powerful stories of finding ways to emotionally support students, and the importance of this support for their relationships with students and for students' and teachers' well-being. An education worker from QPAT, for instance, spoke of this experience:

One of the little girls that I had in my Kindergarten classroom last week had a total meltdown and she'd been crying, you know, feeling awful all afternoon and I just went and talked to her in the afternoon, and I did, that's what we ended up doing, I ended up giving her, like, a big five-second hug. And then, she was completely defused. I mean, [that way] everything was OK after that. You know, little kids get tired and they're feeling stressed, too, and they have parents that are going through stress. So, when you can't – you're supposed to be – there's just no way, this whole six-foot thing is ridiculous.
(QPAT, elementary, 1)

Another teacher provided a different example in a remote learning context:

> **For me the weirdness was that there was a new kind of stress because then I found that students weren't logging on and doing stuff. And it felt like they only really wanted to be online to connect with each other and with me. And so, I started to gradually turn it away from academics and just saw it as a way to connect. And in fact, I started doing bike rides with the kids because that was allowed, and that was fun, and that felt like probably the best part of my whole teaching career.**
>
> (MTS, secondary, 6)

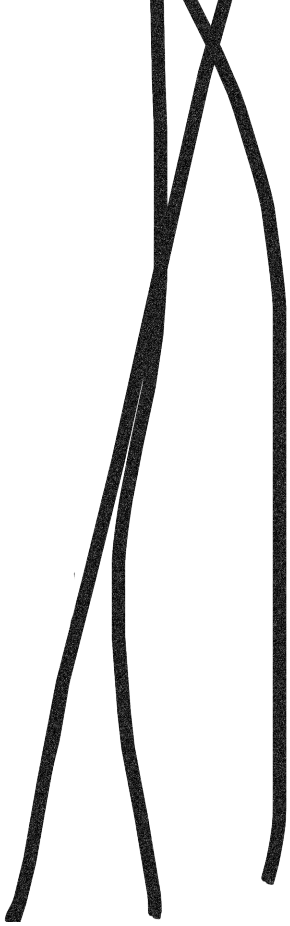
Even as teachers and students found themselves in a schooling context beyond their control, teachers consistently worked to find solutions to support students in the emotional complexities of schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic, including adding outdoor activities to create and sustain community, as seen above.

In taking on and carrying these emotional weights, teachers shared their anxieties around their own abilities to cope. Poignantly, results from the October 2020 *CTF/FCE Teacher Mental Health Check-in Survey* showed 70% of teachers had concerns about their mental health and well-being during the 2020-2021 school year.

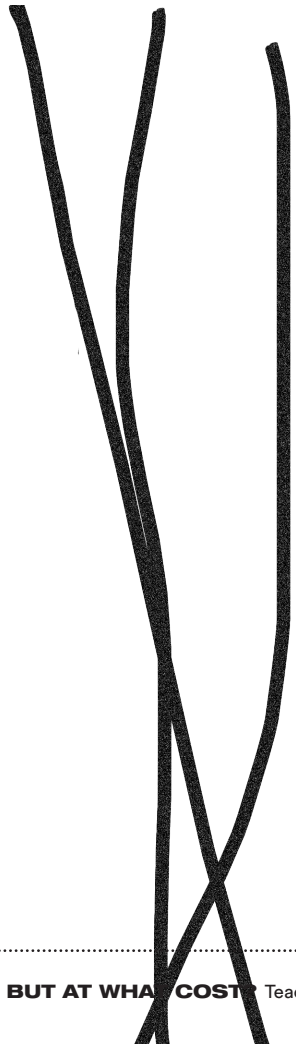
An elementary teacher explained, for instance:

> **All of that stuff and you wake up, OK my throat's a little sore. Is it an allergy, do I have – is it a COVID symptom? What's wrong? Do I need to get a supply [teacher]? Can I get a supply [teacher]? All of those things lead to a huge level of stress and anxiety that you can't fix in some ways, you can't fix it. Because everything's out of your hands in a lot of ways, because you're not in control anymore. Because everything that is changing around you, you can't stop it. And I mean it's like that for a lot of professions too, it's not just the education system and all that. It's our world now, right?**
>
> (NBTA, elementary, 44)

With the circumstances of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, and its rapid and unpredictable changes, education workers carried the emotional weight of their own uncertainties as they tried to continue to be support people for their students, colleagues, parents, and their own close relations. Through this, they continued to cope as best they could, however, this did not come without a cost to their well-being, as many interview participants described the difficulties the prolonged psychological and emotional stress had on their physical health.



Feel it still: Physical weight



And I just want to survive it, that's all. You know, I'm not … I just [sighs] – I'm not going to stop now, I've got one year left to teach. I don't want to go down this way.
(ATA, elementary, 12)

Part of the workload increase in 2020-2021 was not only a psychological hypervigilance and emotional intensity that comes with this vigilance, but the physical changes and the effects of these changes on educators' work and selves.

Physical weight: Risk of exposure

In terms of physical changes to their workload for the 2020-2021 school year, teachers and education workers we spoke with shared the anxieties, fears, and concerns of physical exposure to the COVID-19 virus. Teachers consistently spoke of their increased attention for signs of COVID-19 symptoms and the anxieties over their inabilities to control their levels of exposure as public professionals. A secondary teacher from Alberta for instance provided:

> **So there was a real sense of anxiety going into the classroom in the fall when – kind of what I kept saying. Up until now I've been in control of my risk level. I could control if I saw other people, I would control if I wore a mask in-store and could choose to leave if I felt like other people weren't following protocols.**
>
> (ATA, secondary, 29)

The inability to control their level of exposure meant teachers described making difficult decisions that had to weigh the balance of their personal health circumstances, the contexts of the pandemic in their area, the relative effectiveness of the protocols to protect them, and their professional career choices and aspirations. The teacher from Alberta quoted above explained their choices in this way:

> **I said, "Well every day in the classroom I feel a little afraid for my health and I feel a little disposable." But I like being in person. Online I feel really safe but I don't really like my job, so it's like this trade off, right?**
>
> (29)

Another teacher explained that for them, "I don't feel right about drinking or eating with the kids in the room, because I'm a substitute teacher, and I don't want to take my mask off if they're in the room with me" (BCTF, secondary, 9).

For many teachers, these choices also involved navigating and balancing the effects on their personal relationships and the realities of what may happen if they were exposed to COVID-19 at school. An elementary teacher from PEITF explained:

> **The two-meter, six-foot distance thing is really practically impossible. And to a large degree, it feels to me that even though there's protocols in place, they're mostly cosmetic, they're done because something had to be done, but really, if the virus is in the school, it's going to tear through the place like a wildfire. So, I'm worried about that. I do fear about that. My wife's always saying, "Well, you shouldn't go in until –", you know, she wants me to stay clear of the place.**
>
> (PEITF, elementary, 36)

Another elementary educator from British Columbia shared similar concerns for their levels of exposure and the effects of being in a higher risk environment:

> **And I know some colleagues are still eating with each other, but at the beginning of the pandemic I was just really concerned because I live with my elderly parents who are both immunocompromised. And I found some of my colleagues weren't taking the restrictions and suggestions as seriously as I thought they should have been, so honestly just even talking to them might not feel super safe, so I've just chosen to kind of isolate myself, well then of course [that] leads to a whole bunch of other issues.**
>
> (BCTF, elementary, 7)

Physical weight: Enhanced health and safety tasks

For teachers and education worker that were in the classroom during the 2020-2021 school year, navigating and implementing the often-changing protocols for enhanced health and safety became a new and added task to their everyday workloads. Adding these additional tasks to already overburdened teacher workload meant teachers had to make decisions that often came at a detriment to their personal health and well-being. An educator from BCTF laments for instance “I don’t have time to pee or, drink some water [...] Teachers aren’t cleaners, teachers aren’t supposed to have to clean. But when I’ve got a five-minute break in the morning between my two classes, if I don’t clean the desks, nobody does!” (BCTF, secondary, 9)

In some areas of the country, teachers were not always directly responsible for sanitation in their classrooms and schools. A teacher we spoke with from Alberta described their experience and the concern for their physical health and well-being and that of their students:

> **What happens at our school on the weekend is the caretaker sprays some kind of fog. It's a fog that is supposed to land on things and keep surfaces germ-free. Apparently, they use it in cafeterias and mall bathrooms, but when we walk in on Monday morning, our eyes are immediately starting to itch. We had no choice about this fog, it's supposed to be used once a month, and in our school, it's being used once a week. It is something I'm scared about to add onto things, and that's one of the reasons I get those windows opened up as soon as I get in there, but you can actually see some, like, it's not – the air is not clear. Now, it's supposed to be safe, but [sighs] I've done all I can to look into it and what can I do? It's another thing I can't control.**
>
> (ATA, elementary, 12)

It is not only that teachers have been exposed to an increase in strong chemical cleaning agents as this teacher describes, but the inability to fully control their levels of exposure to the virus and these chemicals weighed on teachers' mental health and physical wellbeing. This added to a sense of uncertainty and lack of safety in the physical environment.

For most teachers and education workers we spoke with, sanitation tasks were something they had to find time to organize, maintain, and enforce. A teacher from ETFO provided an example of the time and consequences of adding sanitation tasks to teachers' workloads, as they explained:

> **[I] carry a big jug of hand sanitizer with me all the time with my big plastic screen on and my mask on and carrying that stuff, Walking around spraying – because you have to spray every kid before they go outside. Every kid in the school, if you're out on yard duty, every kid that comes to that door, you have to put hand sanitizer on their hands before they go in. So the door that I'd watched, there might be 150 kids that come through that door. That**

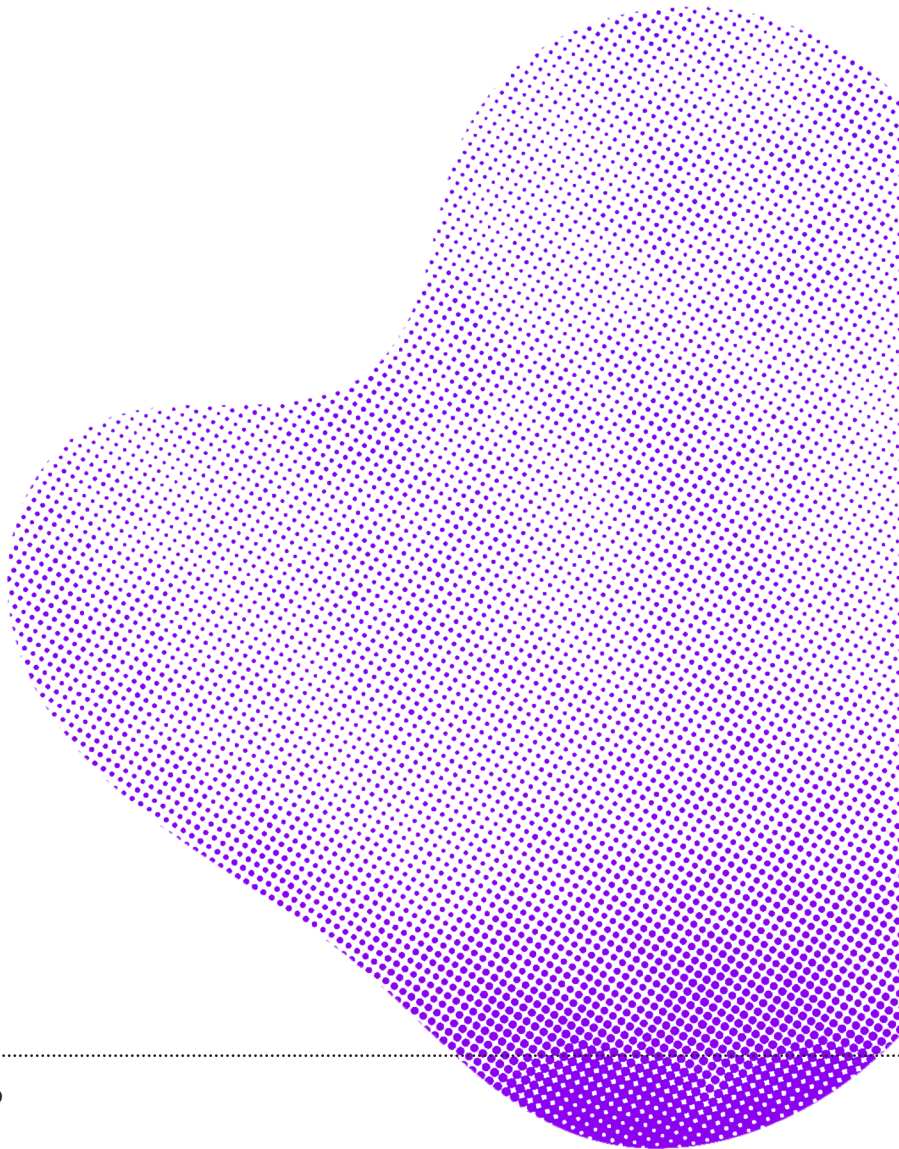
takes extra time too. So, a lot of the time now is spent – recess is over, let's say at 10:40. Well, that takes an extra five, six minutes to hand sanitize every kid. There hasn't been that sort of, I guess acknowledgement from admin saying, well, that's taking time out of either it could be my lunch, could be my classroom time, it could be my prep time. They're just like, "Oh, well just do what you can." It's that same – we're in unprecedented times.
(27)

Sanitation protocols also involved cleaning many of the physical items teachers depend on in their classrooms. A kindergarten teacher explained that in their school "toys, art supplies have to be cleaned twice in a 24-hour period. So, a lot of teachers at my school from grade one and up have just cut out playtime. So that they don't have to clean all that stuff every day. And in kindergarten we're choosing to do it anyways, so then we're adding cleaning toy time onto the end of our workday, right?" (BCTF, elementary, 5). In order to continue "normal" playtime with manipulates and entertaining objects, like toys, teachers needed to implement additional time to clean on a daily basis, as this teacher noted, at the end of their day. In exchange for the extra cleaning time after school on the part of teachers, students retained the experience of play in their classrooms.

A secondary teacher in Quebec provided this example of the increase in physical load of teaching with added health and safety tasks:

> **For me I always stayed late after school, I worked on the weekends just to catch up and make sure I…have enough time for planning and doing all my emails. Like emails are a big, huge issue now and because parents are emailing constantly and trying to stay on top of that. And then you know, you're correcting and getting everything ready for the week; however, on top with these COVID protocols it's just it's added time on the day that I got to remember to… and again, now I was telling you that we are moving classrooms, I have eight different groups so, I have to move to eight different classrooms. So, then I'm constantly have my little bucket of papers like photocopies and materials that I need, and I got to in my head I've got to go over OK, what do I need for this class?…I can't use the smart board like I used to…We don't even have a computer or technology in the room so, and then before each class I got to take at least five to ten minutes to put on my PPE to make sure that I'm prepared and ready to go…And even with the plastic shield that I wear, sometimes like it feels like you're wearing a dome around your head so you're loud, but you don't really know, you don't really have that awareness. So, there's all these things that we're just adjusting to. And it's – I just find as the year goes on it's getting more and more difficult and even, I dread like the morning waking up.**
> (QPAT, secondary, 13)

As the experiences of teachers in this section explored, sanitation tasks were new to their mandated workloads and often meant teachers were using preparation time, their lunch time, teaching time or before or after-hours time for such work, adding to their feelings of exhaustion, frustration in not being able to organize and prepare, and their anxieties about being responsible if protocols are not followed or forgotten.



Physical weight: Protocol policing

Another part of these protocols was ensuring students also followed them and were safe. Many teachers and education workers spoke of the added workload of not simply implementing protocols but policing health and safety protocols. A teacher in Prince Edward Island described the added workload of enforcing protocols, especially as they changed to meet public health and safety measures of the pandemic:

> **I have to do roughly twice the amount of supervision compared with last year, and then there's protocols. Some protocols were detailed in the operational plan at the start of the year, but as restrictions change at the provincial level, we end up with new protocols. It's a lot to manage with students. I finish and start my classes five minutes late each time, I teach secondary, so that the students can disinfect. So I have to supervise that, and make sure students wear their masks, and all that.**
> (PEITF, secondary, 2)

As this teacher described, policing protocols became another component of their supervision duties that required continual vigilance. One teacher from MTS quipped, "a kid would drop a pencil and would be like "Oh, sanitize that"" (6). Policing protocols also meant taking time away from student learning to ensure protocols were followed, and energy on the part of teachers to "be aware." As an NBTA secondary teacher explained, in her experience:

The students are incredible, they've been incredible with wearing masks and sanitizing... but it is another aspect of our job that we have to be on top of. If they're not sanitizing, you know, to remind them, if they're taking their mask off, to remind them, if they're not socially distanced, to remind them.... That's exhausting in itself....it is just one more thing that you have to be aware of.
(NBTA, secondary, 25)

Another teacher from ATA agreed, commenting, "I would say actually the biggest thing that sucks up my emotional energy is the mask policing" (ATA, secondary, 29).

Much like the psychological weight of health and safety mindfulness, policing health and safety protocols was physically exhausting for teachers. The physical exhaustion of implementing and monitoring sanitation protocols was paired with the emotional and psychological weight of the possible consequences if protocols were not followed, or someone became sick. An elementary teacher from ETFO described:

In the beginning, especially, I was really worried about anyone in my class getting sick and having it come back to me. I really, like, not me physically being sick and being a carrier; I was just so worried that if I had, like, two kids in my class who got COVID I felt that I was going to be, you know, you didn't make sure they were sanitized every 20 minutes; you didn't get the desks wiped down; you didn't have them socially distanced. I just felt a lot of not – kind of, I was worried that, like, a parent would try to sue me.
(ETFO, elementary, 38)

The teacher was not only worried about students becoming sick from a failure to properly implement protocols, but was also afraid of being held personally liable for any illness that could happen under their watch. Although this outcome might not have been legally viable, the fear was still present for those who held high levels of responsibility for the safety and well-being of their students.

Physical weight: Effects of stress

The physical load of teaching during 2020-2021 was often expressed in the physical effects teachers and education workers experienced: exhaustion, weight changes, loss of motivation or appetite, changes in sleep patters, back, neck, and eye strain, among others. In the October *CTF/FCE Teacher Mental Health Check-in Survey*, for instance, nearly 40% (38.6%) of respondents indicated that "meeting personal and professional expectations" was "very draining." The survey results also showed that teachers were "struggling to support their own needs for personal health and sustenance,"[27] where over a third of teachers reported insufficient sleep, hydration, or physical movement during the day. Additionally, over half reported "sometimes" being able to keep up with tasks and communications in their daily schedules.

As we talked with educators about their workloads during the follow-up qualitative interviews, teachers admitted to their utter exhaustion – psychologically, emotionally, and physically – and the physical effects of stress they have noticed in themselves and their colleagues and their students. Some teachers noticed their stress and fatigue early in the school year and were somewhat able to find ways to cope. An elementary teacher from Alberta admitted, "By lunchtime, I'm exhausted from all my worrying, and I'm going to tell you a big secret, don't tell my staff, I sneak out to my car, my SUV, and I sleep for half an hour" (ATA, elementary, 12).

Another teacher from Manitoba explained:

> **By the end of the day, I would be so exhausted that any kind of prep work or anything related to my job at the end of the day is not going to happen. It just doesn't work. So I'm a lot more productive if I get there early, get my stuff organized, figure out, OK what is my schedule going to be, because from day to day that can change.**
>
> (MTS, elementary, 6)

By the end of the day, this teacher was not able to complete the work that they needed to do for the following days due to exhaustion, leading them to cope by waking up earlier to prepare for their day. For a teacher in the Yukon, the exhaustion of the physical, emotional, and psychological workload of the pandemic meant being honest about how they were feeling and recognizing students were also exhausted.

> **Like, I am so frigging tired. I'm so tired that that last week of school, I got no prep done, I got no grading done, and the last day, the kids start, like, trickling in, whatever, three out of the eight who are going to come in or something, and I'm like, "Do you guys want to work? Because I don't want to work." Like, let's not work, you know. And they're all – and their answer, too, wasn't even just, you know, "yay! Let's not work!" They're just, like, "Oh, thank God, I'm too tired, I'm so tired." You know, I mean, we're done. But I think a big part of it is, like I said, it's not even that things are so bad, but that a constant adjustment, you know, constantly doing things new and different in an unfamiliar way is just inherently stressful.**
>
> (YAEP, secondary, 16)

For the teacher from the YAEP, they described how students have also been feeling exhausted and beyond excitement when given free time in class. As they stated, normally students would be celebratory to have time away from completing work, and instead, they simply were relieved.

For other teachers, the physical load of teaching in the pandemic was not something they recognized right away, but upon reflection, the effects were cumulative. A teacher from Alberta powerfully described how they noticed the physical effects of teaching during the pandemic:

I keep saying, when we got to Thanksgiving, I said, "Wow, we made it to Thanksgiving," we got to Christmas, I said, "Wow, we made it to Christmas," we get to March Break, I'm like, "Wow, we made it to March Break," and I foresee myself saying that for Easter, Victoria Day weekend and the end of the year. […] I know I'm going to look back, at that time, and say, "Wow, it wasn't a bad year." But then, I'm going to look at my pants that don't fit because I've lost weight and the bags under my eyes and I'm going to say, "But it was a strain – there was strain there and it was a hard, hard year". I'm sure that's what I'm going to say.

(ATA, elementary, 12)

Not only was the teacher in this instance struggling to make it to the next benchmark in the year, but they also had considerable changes to their physical well-being, including weight loss, that physically showed the strain they felt all year. In their words, it was a "strain" and "a hard, hard year."

For other teachers still, the strain of the year exacerbated on-going health struggles. A teacher from Prince Edward Island reflected on the changes to their mental health and well-being saying:

> **Before the pandemic, I was already taking medication for depression and anxiety, and since the start of the pandemic, my doses have increased twice, even if they had been stable for a year or two. So yes, it has an impact on mental health. For sure.**
>
> (PEITF, secondary, 2)

In education worker narratives, the weights of increased workload also appeared in the physical changes educators noticed as the year progressed. This points to the importance of recognizing the longer term and accumulating physical and mental health effects of the pandemic for teachers and education workers.

Acknowledging the weight: Lessons, boundaries, and survival

As the RPL researchers spoke with teachers and education workers in the qualitative interviews, the power of teacher resilience in the face of their overburdened workloads cannot be understated. Yet, the resilience so many teachers showed through their determination to keep going, to support students, parent, colleagues, and their own close relations was consistently stained with the "cost" of these efforts. As the teacher from ATA said in the quote that makes up the title of this report – "we always figure it out, *but at what cost?*"

In terms of teachers' and education workers' mental health and well-being, the conversations we had with teachers made it clear that the cost is startingly high to the point of unsustainability. The same teacher from ATA offered, "So, [sighs] as long as we survive, I'm going to say that – chalk it up as a year of learning from me – for me, and for them, a year of stretching the elastic as far as it would go, until it was almost broken. But I think we're making it work. I really do" (ATA, elementary, 12). Using the metaphor of "stretching the elastic too thin," this teacher acknowledges that 2020-2021 was a difficult year that almost broke people down, but even in this context, still maintains a sense of hopefulness, in that teachers and education workers continue to survive and do what they need to do for students.

For many teachers, "surviving" their workloads was all they could manage. Indeed, as the *Teacher Mental Health Check-in Survey* from October 2020 reported, a third of teachers who responded

felt they were "barely coping" with daily stresses of teaching, and 46% were "somewhat coping." As we asked teachers what they were doing to try and cope, some described how they found ways to make personal and professional boundaries to ease their workload. A secondary teacher from QPAT explained:

> **There's been so much change really quickly that we're just – we're just adjusting all the time. And that's been really – that's a lot more mental work, and a lot more stress and anxiety with that so, we – but to be honest, you have to let it go. Because you have to be in that mentality of OK, well, it is what it is, I'm going to do the best I can. It's not going to be perfect is how I've told myself, and it's not how I normally would do things, but in this situation I have – it has to be what it is; you know?**
>
> (QPAT, secondary, 13)

A teacher in Manitoba described how they coped with the emotional workload:

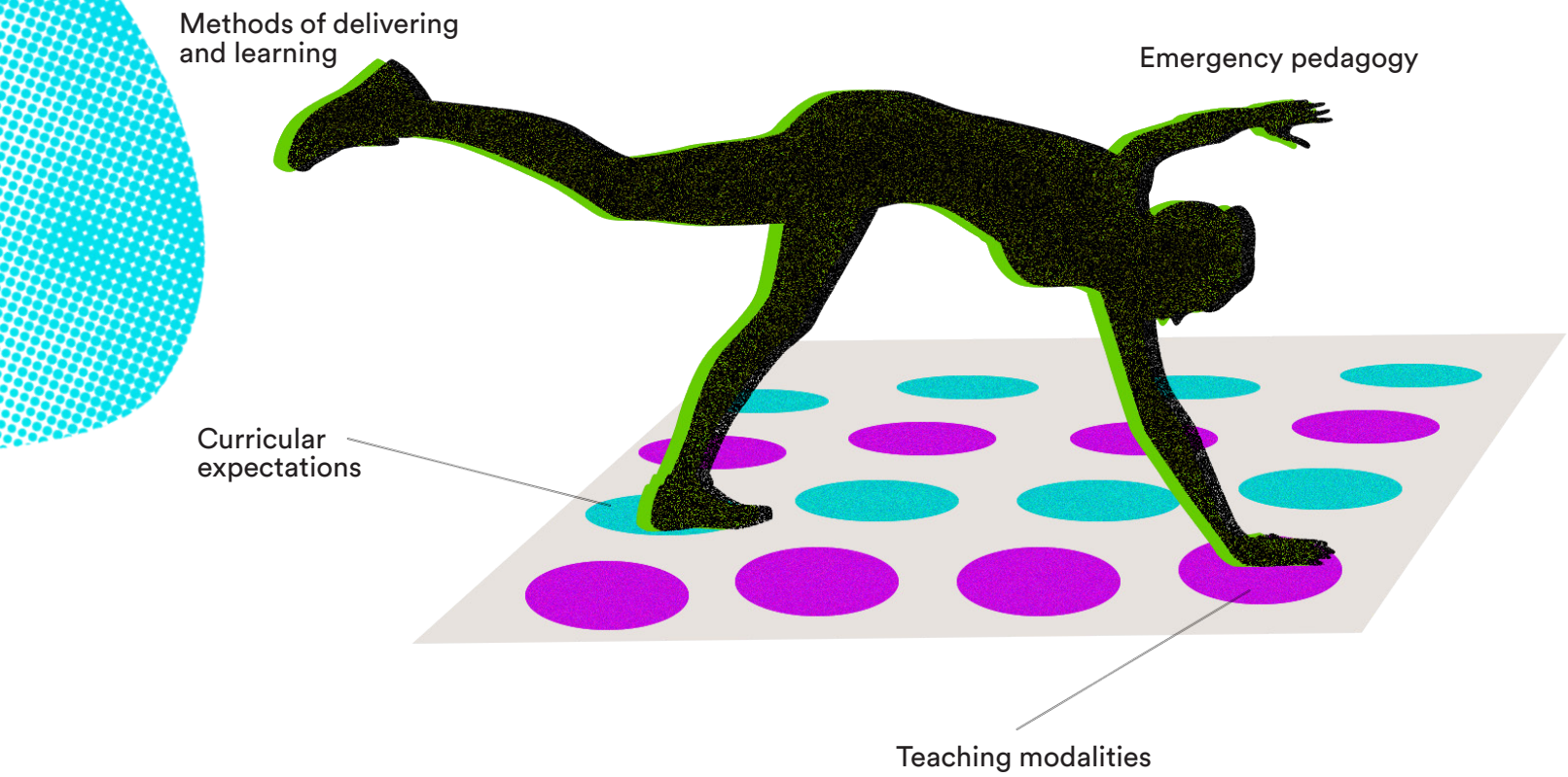
> **Overall, I think that some of the social emotional stuff is hard to disentangle from grief; shock and grief. Because that was certainly a big part of the beginning of this year. But I, yeah, I think overall the gift of the loss has been a bit of that sort of focus on – this is going to pass, we're going to get through it and we just have to, and I'm sort of more able to set boundaries that allow me to be OK. And not worry about nurturing relationships that aren't good for me and be able to say, no I haven't seen my mom and sisters, I'm not going to worry about trying to make amends with a colleague who's not that great or worry about a teacher who yelled at me when I didn't deserve it or that kind of thing.**
>
> (MTS, program specialist, 8)

A large aspect of coping for this teacher was in the realization that perfection was not attainable, and that energy for difficult relationships normally used to sustain and maintain or deal with conflict needed to be let go to survive. For other teachers still, coping was something they were trying to figure out. A secondary teacher somewhat sarcastically remarked, "What do I do to cope? [Long pause] I don't know, yell at my partner, I don't know, repress my feelings. There's nothing particularly – yeah, it's a challenge, there's not a whole lot of real healthy outlets, you know?" (YAEP, secondary, 16)

Speaking with education workers about their workload during the 2020-2021 school year revealed the added weights of sanitation tasks, mindfulness, anticipation, and hypervigilance, along with unpredictable change to teachers' workloads because of the COVID-19 pandemic. These weights appeared in the headspace teachers needed to feel prepared and on top of their regular tasks, in the emotional connections and supports they carried for students, colleagues, close relations and themselves, and in the physical effects of stress, anxiety, and exhaustion they recognized and witnessed in themselves and others.

Pedagogical pivots: Modality Twister

"Pivot" quickly became an overused term to describe changes in circumstances for teachers in publicly funded public education during the pandemic. Yet, speaking with teachers about their experiences working during this time, the simplicity of the term "pivot" does injustice to the complexity, frequency, and magnitude of changes they described.



The “pivots” that occurred during 2020-2021, such as the move to online, hybrid, or socially distanced in-person teaching, carried with them a cascade of changes. Such changes disrupted and substantially changed teachers’ working environments, their modes of instructional delivery and assessment, as well as the ways they built and maintained important relationships with students, parents/guardians, and colleagues. Teachers used many metaphors and turns of phrases in their descriptions that showed the emotional, physical, psychological, and professional cost of the rapid, continual, and often seemingly spontaneous “pivots” on education workers' mental health and well-being.

As the RPL team spoke with teachers across the country, they told us about the multiple pedagogical shifts that occurred due to rapidly changing public health environments. The coded data showed that the majority of teachers discussed these shifts in terms of teaching modality with the move to online (91% experiencing online), in-person distanced (69%), and hybrid (31%) teaching and learning contexts. The unique shifts and challenges brought forth from each of these educational contexts caused education workers concern in several areas, with 81% of interview participants citing student success as their top concern, followed by myriad issues with student assessment (44%), difficulty meeting curriculum standards (41%) and the role of educational resources in student instruction during the pandemic (16%) (Figure 8).

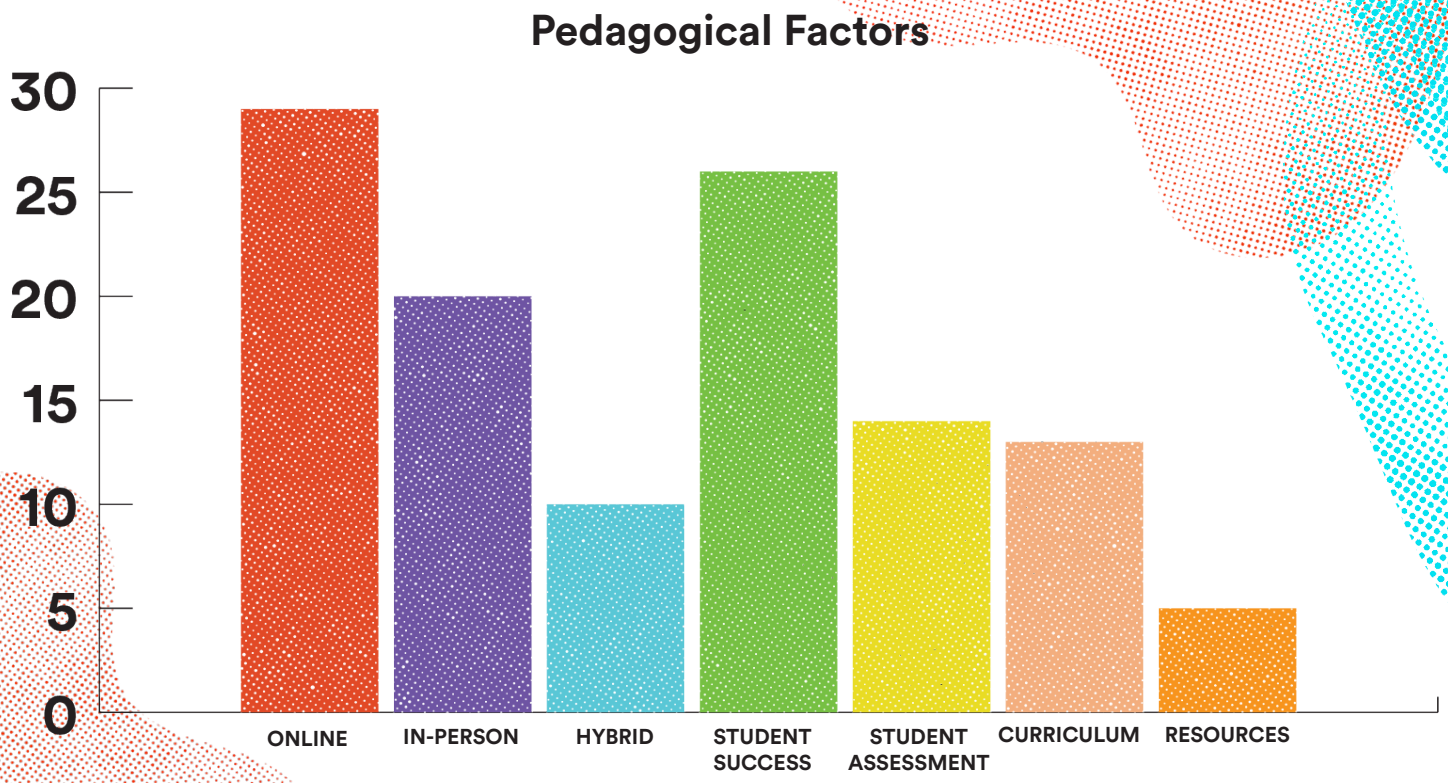


Figure 8. Coded pedagogical aspects of concern

Pivot: Pedagogy in Emergency

Every time admin threw something at us, or something happened pandemic-related that required a shift in how I approached my work — that was really stressful to deal with. (BCTF, secondary, 7)

An underlying, but always present sense of emergency and crisis underpinned the 2020-2021 school year, and this sense of unease permeated conversations about pedagogy. In part, this year was very much a shift from "teaching as usual" to educating in the context of a global public health crisis; a shift that has not occurred on a global scale in a century. Public education looked vastly different in 2020-2021 than previous years, including the need for educators to teach in restrictive and/or new ways, such as fully virtual or hybrid teaching, and at the same time, be responsive to further unpredictable changes. In effect, through the barrage of shifts in teaching modalities and continual upending of what was considered "normal", teachers described a sort of merry-go-round of pedagogical shifts. In the constant shifting, education workers were unable to feel situated and grounded in their work, constantly attempting to respond to the needs of their students, and continuously adjusting to changing contexts beyond their control. The COVID-19 public education landscape across Canada spun pedagogical expertise on its head, affecting the mental health and well-being of education workers as they attempted to navigate the spinning pivots of this landscape.

Educators explained that this landscape produced a sense of living and surviving day-by-day as they anticipated changes to teaching and learning contexts throughout the rapidly evolving health crisis. A QPAT secondary teacher with 15–19 years' experience explained, "there's a lot of unknown still. So, I just – actually really, it's just day by day like I'm just going day by day, week by week, and what the end is going to look like I don't know" (QPAT, secondary, 13). As was evident from teachers' stories in the workload section, living through prolonged anticipation due to continued emergency responsive teaching in the pandemic increased teachers' psychological workloads and their stress.

Emergency responsive teaching in the pandemic made teachers feel as though they were "scrambling" (ETFO, 28), or "literally running around like a chicken with my head cut off" (NSTU, 42), especially during initial school closures and throughout any major pivots to their work. An elementary teacher from Manitoba described their uncertainties and scattered thought process:

No one seemed to know what was going on, what was happening. What were we going to do? What were the policies? How were we going to do *this*? How were we going to do *that*? There was so much unknown, and it was getting closer to the end of August, and I was starting to freak out because I didn't even have everything ready, I didn't know how to collect myself!
(MTS, elementary, 6)

For many teachers and education workers, the feeling of not being able to catch up or "collect oneself" continued throughout the school year. In this sense, teachers required "pivoting" not only through their delivery of instruction, but in the way they approached their teaching practice. The complexity and cascade of effects out of this pivot to emergency pedagogy on teachers' mental health and well-being cannot be understated.

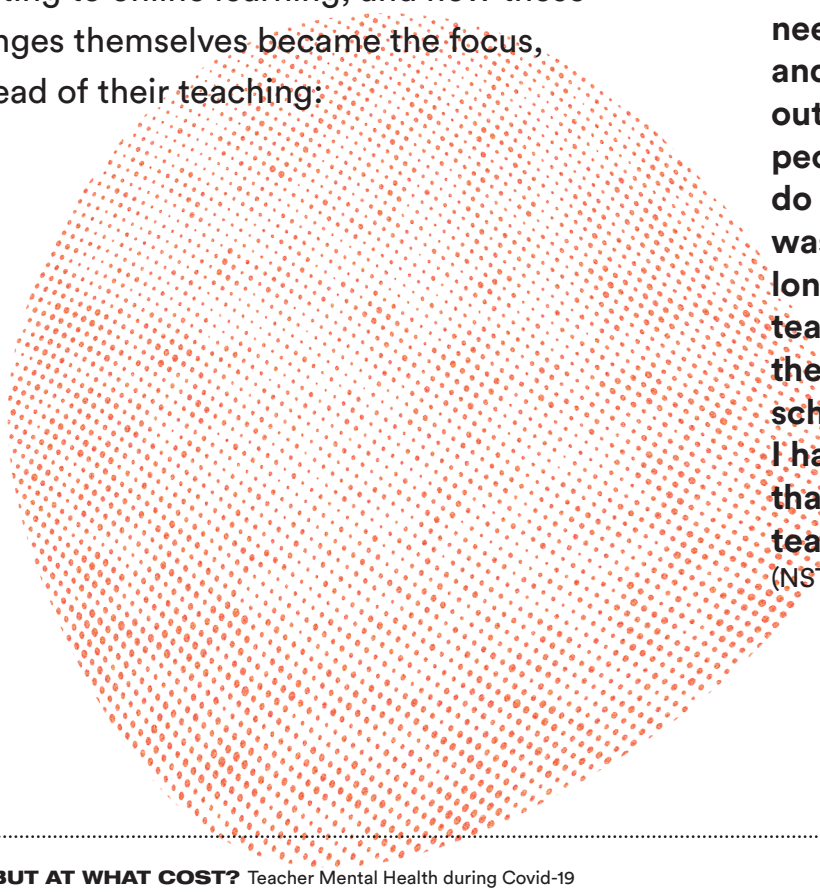
A significant affect teachers described from emergency pedagogy was anxiety and exhaustion due to a lack of time to prepare. As a teacher from ETFO explained, at the beginning of the school year, a lack of time meant finding pedagogical solutions quickly and often at their own monetary expense:

> **So, we were kind of left, trying to scramble and figure things out. The main issue with why things have been taking so long is we're creating most of our material from scratch. And spending hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of dollars out of our own pocket to get units off TPT [Teachers Pay Teachers] because we just don't have time to reinvent the wheel.**
>
> (ETFO, elementary, 28)

It was the immediacy of the emergency that required such quick pedagogical solutions from teachers, yet, as the example above describes, it was also the sense of not having time to "reinvent the wheel" of pedagogy to adapt to these emergent situations that was a source of anxiety and stress.



Another teacher from NSTU described their experience as a specialist teacher for students with physical disabilities. As this teacher spoke, they explained the organizational changes that had to happen so teachers could continue to support students with special needs as they were pivoting to online learning, and how these changes themselves became the focus, instead of their teaching:



I had to go into each individual school and teach everybody how to turn on all these accessibility settings. And then the province said that everything was accessible for students with visual impairments and that they had access to these things. But regionally it was very different and unless the head of the tech department knew what things to toggle on and off, there was the capability of it being accessible, but it wasn't actually accessible. And so, then I had to make a list for the province of these are the things that you guys need to have turned on and you need to send that out to your regional tech people and they need to do this. […] I just felt like I was putting out fires all day long, rather than actually teaching. Because on top of the access that I provide for school teams and students, I have my own curriculum that I'm supposed to be teaching.
(NSTU, elementary, 42)

Teachers also described how an emphasis on the public health crisis bled into their pedagogies. Increasingly, their teaching time was spent maintaining and patrolling health and safety protocols. An ETFO teacher described, for instance: "I feel that it is more the same old thing every day. It's like Groundhog Day, every day. Here we are, again, sitting in rows, telling everyone stay apart. Don't go over there. Stay in your seat, stay in your seat. Don't go over there. Don't use that" (ETFO, elementary, 27). An MTS teacher also described the sense of emphasis on the emergency of the pandemic in their pedagogy when they said:

> **There was just all this, you know, wearing a mask all day and not being able to show my warm and friendly face and not feeling like I could be myself. So much of the teaching was actually not even academic, it was all about hygiene, it was all about, you know, the rules of the school now, just how things are.**
> (MTS, elementary, 6)

Most teachers and education workers communicated a sense of resignation to this shift in their pedagogy, as the MTS teacher above notes – "it's just how things are." For other teachers, the longer-term effects of emergency pedagogy were of concern for themselves, their students, and communities. A teacher in Prince Edward Island reflected, for instance:

> **I would say that what worries me the most is the fact that we are truly dealing with an unprecedented situation. And I don't think we're providing students, nor teachers, or families, with strategies to cope with all this. […] we were told at the start of the year not to talk about COVID-19 in class to avoid creating anxiety among students, who were already feeling anxious about it. For example, we couldn't ask students to write a journal, and then to talk about how they experienced the pandemic, or things like that. But students aren't dumb. They have to disinfect their desks four times a day, to clean their hands seven or eight times a day, to wear a mask all day long. They know it's there.**
> (PEITF, secondary, 2)

In this school, teachers were asked to not discuss the pandemic with students, with the understanding that doing so would increase their anxieties by talking about their experiences. The participant noted, however, that the students knew exactly what was going on, and constantly needing to clean their desks during the day was a reminder that things were not "normal." Being asked to keep those conversations from students, as the teacher shared, was concerning because no strategies were in place for teachers to help guide students through this unprecedented experience. Instead, they were asked to ignore the effects.



Pivot: Pedagogical Modality

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed how public education operated in Canada and globally, and within these shifts, education workers needed to shift their practice; their pedagogies were disrupted, flipped upside-down, and in some cases, were unrecognizable, leaving educators questioning what their job had become. As reported in the *Teacher Mental Health Check-in Survey: Teaching Modalities Segment Report*, most teachers found themselves teaching hybrid forms of online synchronous or asynchronous and in-person teaching, or a modified version of in-person teaching during the 2020-2021 school year.[28] For some, that meant modified in-person teaching, for others it meant taking on teaching online for the first time, and for many, it meant returning to worksheets, and sterile rows of students without technology due to fears of contamination.

As the RPL team asked teachers about the changes and modifications to their teaching practice, they overwhelmingly spoke of the stress, anxiety, and exhaustion of having to pivot learning modes in their pedagogies to be responsive to the pandemic. Educators stated that the mental health effects were most prominent in the first pivot to online or emergency response learning. This was because pivoting to emergency response learning or online distance learning were entirely new pedagogical forms for most teachers.

A teacher from QPAT rhetorically asked: "how do you find the information and give it a totally different delivery mode?" (QPAT, elementary, 1). And it was finding, developing, and then actioning this totally different delivery mode without adequate time that left teachers "scrambling" and relying on services like Teachers Pay Teachers, an American-based online pay-for-service platform where teachers can purchase content like worksheets and unit plans. Further, teachers were learning new modes of delivery as they were supporting students in online and emergency remote learning. A kindergarten teacher from ETFO described that the "most challenging pieces [...] was all the beginning of the time, getting everybody up and running and the platforms were different and, you know, my computer's not turning on, I don't understand how to connect with printer. Teachers were technology support for families, and it was a nightmare" (ETFO, elementary, 15). In this example, education workers needed to plan to teach through new platforms. However, this necessitated them first learning the platforms, digitizing their content, and then helping guide students and their families (especially for younger children) through the new platforms as well. As this teacher noted, it was "a nightmare" to be in the role of technology support for students and their families.

Further, teachers encountered myriad hurdles as they attempted to navigate and continue delivering quality instruction and content in new forms. This included privacy issues, and the capacity of the technology or platform. For one educator, navigating these aspects added another layer of work: "So, we're given the technology, then we're given the tools, but we're so limited in how we use them because of confidentiality that it almost creates more work" (PEITF, secondary, 2).

Modality move: Online virtual learning

The most prominent shift for teachers' pedagogy was moving from in-person in-class teaching to online learning. Teachers' experience in this shift varied widely across the country. Indeed, during the 2020-2021 school year the CTF/FCE tracked school restarting plans that all showed different protocols for in-person learning, hybrid, and/or online virtual school scenarios in response to COVID-19 case counts and levels of viral transmission.[29] Not only were the plans constantly shifting, but there was a wide range of reopening plans and protocols that could differ between districts, and in some cases were different at the school level, meaning there was little consistency or standardized practice over time and place.

In these varied experiences, overall, teachers who had to teach remotely through online platforms and virtual environments felt the strongest strain on their mental health and well-being. In the June 2020 CTF/FCE pandemic survey, teachers reported on the limitations of online learning, and difficulties in engaging students over online platforms. The results also showed that teachers had

concerns about effectively communicating with students, as well as providing assessment and emotional support.[30] Further, in the October 2020 *CTF/FCE Teacher Mental Health Check-in Survey*, teachers in online-only teaching contexts reported feeling significantly less happy than teachers who were teaching in hybrid or in-person only contexts. Teachers in online contexts also reported higher levels of stress overall than teachers in hybrid or in-person only teaching during the time of the survey.[31]

In the follow-up qualitative interviews, we asked teachers and education workers about their experiences as they changed teaching modalities. Teachers reiterated that teaching online was one of their biggest sources of stress during the 2020-2021 school year. It was for this reason 91% of the coded discussions from the interviews discuss online learning (see Figure 9, above). As teachers spoke, they described the complexities of changing modalities, including the differences in their abilities to navigate the technical knowledge needed to teach through online platforms, and the lack of time to properly learn and prepare for each shift. A secondary teacher from British Columbia poignantly conveyed these differences:

We had a bit of a leg-up as a district, we'd already had this online portal website set up where teachers could assign things and students could hand them in, so at least there was that. But there is always going to be issues with some teachers being more tech-savvy than others.

Some teachers were really set up for online learning already because they'd already recorded a bunch of their lessons, so it was great for them. Whereas on the flip side there's our mostly retired 60-year-old teachers who are like: "What? What is this Google thing?" I am exaggerating of course. But I think I was somewhere in the middle, I hadn't recorded things, but I was a bit more innovative than some others, so I was sort of able to navigate it.

It was tricky to be motivated though. I think there is something about showing up to work, and even if I'm in a horrible mood the kids are there, and no matter my mood I have to be happy for them, I have to smile for them. And I find that that faking it actually ends up making me in a better mood by the end, and then it makes me a better teacher. So there's that which is missing. So I've found with a lot of the online teaching I was just really lethargic, unmotivated. It was really hard to do the bare minimum, which for me – normally a really hard worker, perfectionistic – was very different, for sure.
(BCTF, secondary, 7)

Yet for other teachers, teaching online afforded them some peace of mind over exposure and other stresses that came with in-person teaching during the pandemic. As a teacher in Saskatchewan remarked: "I mean it is stressful at times and, having said that, I would rather be where I am [teaching online] than in the classroom at this time just because I have a lot of colleagues who are in the classroom that are stressed because of what's going on, right?" (STF, elementary, 30).

Most teachers and education workers who found themselves teaching online were working in this modality for the first time, and had to create content from scratch, adding to the stress and strain of the time commitments of planning and delivering quality instruction online. A teacher with previous online experience remarked: "if you're not just going to put worksheets and things like that online, if you're actually going to teach, then it takes a lot of work…it takes a lot of time finding the information then building the lessons" (STF, elementary, 30). A teacher QPAT further noted: "Like yes, we can get information across and yes we can do some learning, but it's just not the same. So, we have to figure out how you're going to evaluate and how you're going to have assignments handed in and how you're going to do health…" (QPAT, secondary, 13).

Another educator explained the distinction of online to in-person learning when they said,

In a classroom, you would be able to focus on your students in front of you and, you know, go around, help those students. But now, most of the time, you're stuck at your laptop trying to manage the kids at home, and trying to bring up chat messages while you're teaching because you're sharing your screen, so you can't show the chat as well, and then, those students are writing stuff in the chat, and you're missing it, and... so, when you think about our inclusive education... the students that are learning from home, trying to include them as well in synchronous and it's just – it's impossible to meet everybody's needs. It's just – it's craziness [laughs]. I don't even know how to describe it.

(NBTA, secondary, 25)

Many teachers shared their concerns about teaching online for student success and inclusive and equitable pedagogical practices. Adding to their difficulties, was that many mandated education platforms were not supportive of complex students' needs.

As an OSSTF/FEESO teacher explained:

There are those elements working together as a team for the education of them as a school and to help them move towards graduating and [becoming] better students, better humans that we can't address very well when they're not with us. Like physically with us.

(OSSTF/FEESO, secondary, 18)

Another teacher quipped: "we were told we had to use Microsoft Teams. And it's not necessarily a platform I would choose to use with kindergarten children who can't read or write or type" (BCTF, elementary, 5). In this instance, the basic reading, writing, and computer literacy required to navigate advanced platforms was not yet learned, in effect making the teaching process difficult for all involved.

A specialist teacher further reported that online platforms did not have proper accessibility functionality for students with physical disabilities, including visual or hearing impairments. The teacher described:

> **At the beginning of the pandemic, we didn't even have close captioning and things for Zoom. And if you're visually impaired and people are talking and they don't announce who they are and all – so we had to set rules. Like Zoom etiquette for when you have a visually impaired student, identify yourself on Zoom. Describe what you were talking about in detail and all of that sort of stuff.**
>
> (NSTU, specialist, 42)

Another aspect was simply the lack of time for good pedagogy to engage students meaningfully in online spaces. One teacher explained, "Online it's harder because you have this finite bit of time with them. And if they're not understanding this one little thing it could take – I've had a simple number of the day activity take a half an hour online because they're not following what we're doing" (MTS, elementary, 24). A teacher from OSSTF/FEESO noted, "…if we had time, it just wouldn't be so bad" (18). Another teacher reiterated this sentiment saying "it would take so long to prep things, it would take so long to mark things, it would take so long to, like, I'm at a point now where I just – I stopped making things pretty and, you know, nice. I just don't have time" (ETFO, elementary, 28).

Teachers' experiences highlight the enormity, swiftness, and intensity of the pivot to online learning and emergency pedagogy. It was therefore not only the pivot itself that was difficult, but all the complex aspects of teachers' professional expertise, experience, and ways of connecting with students that were also affected. In these changes, teachers struggled to keep up, to collect themselves, to learn, to adapt, and to continue supporting their students in the midst of pedagogical upheaval.

Modality move: Hybrid learning

The complexity of the pivot was also deeply felt by teachers and education workers who were required to navigate teaching in-person and online contexts at the same time. Teachers described the "doubling" effect on their pedagogies and workloads as they supported students in-person and online, all the while anticipating further pivots in the ever-changing pandemic context.

A teacher from QPAT described this shift in detail:

> **Our grade 9s, 10s and 11s are in school one day and they're online the next day. So, and they're all staggered which means that I got to double check and triple check my calendars all the time to make sure OK, are my grade 9s in class today or is it my grade 11s. And then are they online or are they not so, it's a lot of flying by the seat of your pants because you don't know – you really are just going day by day because it could change so much.**
>
> (QPAT, secondary, 13)

Another teacher from NBTA expressed a similar experience of trying to keep up with the enormity of hybrid teaching along with the uncertainties of emergency teaching:

> **In September when we were told that, you know, 1,000 students were going to be at home and we were told that we could do asynchronous teaching, it was overwhelming, but we managed, we figured it out, we had a really good thing going, it was working for the students, it was working for families, it was working for teachers. And then, that changed to synchronous, to do live teaching, not knowing the technology, not knowing the, you know, privacy issues around it, that we were going to be open to people's homes every single day, every class.**
>
> **It was to figure out, OK, well, how do you change your lessons so that you, you know, you meet the outcomes, you're effective in what you're teaching, yet you aren't keeping the kids at home online the whole class, but also, wanting to be effective to the ones in front of you because they're there that day, and it's just – it's … [sighs] yeah, it's just trying – it's trying to meet all of their needs.**
>
> (NBTA, secondary, 25)

As the above explains, hybrid teaching could be asynchronous or synchronous, both carrying different challenges for teachers and students. Teachers consistently related their exhaustion and concerns as they continued to attempt to provide responsive pedagogy in multiple, changing formats. This challenge was compounded by the unpredictability of further changes. A teacher from Manitoba articulated this sentiment saying:

For me it's doing both online teaching and teaching kids right in front of you. It's – it's exhausting. You feel like you're split into two different people. And you're trying to do two jobs – well actually I'm always doing more than two jobs at the same time, but you almost feel you're doing 8 to 10 jobs at the same time.

(MTS, elementary, 14)

The act of teaching online and in-person at the same time, while being broadcast into students' homes, took an enormous amount of energy to enact. As this teacher described, it was akin to working 8-10 jobs concurrently.

Modality move: In-person Socially Distant Teaching

Emergency pedagogy and enhanced safety protocols in schools meant that even when teachers were able to continue to teach in-person, they had to pivot their pedagogies in ways that put established best practices, such as collaboration, group work and inquiry-based practices in tension with maintaining social distancing. In many areas, teachers described how this brought back factory models of classroom set-ups.

A secondary teacher from ATA described their pandemic classroom:

> **We've been encouraged to just seat students in their desks, on their own, teacher at the front of the room lecturing to them, which is not how I – I mean there's components of that of course at a high school level. But I like to do a lot more group work; I like to do a lot more I'm moving around with the students. And a: we're discouraged from doing it; but b: I don't feel particularly comfortable when the kids have their masks off. So, I've noticed that – I was a big, I almost never sat down, and I would be wandering, kind of**

weaving. If they were doing individual work, I'd be weaving in and out to kind of see how they're doing and talk to them. But having to every second be like, "Put on your mask so I can come down that row," it just doesn't seem worth it to be interrupting their work to tell a kid to put on his mask so I can go down that row and see how they're doing. And I find that kind of, that energy and that rhythm is gone, of just a natural classroom environment because I feel very separated. I'm at the front of the room or at my desk and they're in their rows.

(ATA, secondary, 29)

Reflecting on these distinctions, the same teacher described how the changes and inability to have a "natural rhythm" to their teaching emotionally affected them and their sense of self as an educator.

I feel like I'm really reflecting on the difference of this as compared to what I usually do, and just wanting to get back there. But yeah, if anything it's just made me reflect on this as not the type of teacher I want to be and maybe thinking about times where I did the lecture at the front of the room, distanced from the students in the past when I didn't have to. But then there's sadness, but I can't do anything about that.

(ATA, secondary, 29)

The sadness that comes from not being able to connect to students and their practice provided a sense of longing "to get back" to making pedagogical choices that are professionally satisfactory. An elementary teacher from Ontario described a similar feeling of losing an important connective aspect to their teaching because of the social distancing protocols for themselves and their students. Even in a very different part of the country from the teacher above, the sense of sadness and loss in this teacher's words continued to be palpable:

> **But they're sitting in rows, and I said to them today when we're reading a book, like, to sit in a row reading a book, it's so unnatural. Like, you want to sit in a circle and have people together, like, I've done a lot of work with restorative practices and [tried] training and, you know, building a community is so important to making your community – your classroom community a rich place for children to learn. It's so unnatural right now, you know?**
>
> (ETFO, elementary, 15)

A second ETFO teacher described the shift in pedagogy as being "very 1970's" due to the removal of all digital technology in the classroom and reliance on worksheets, with students working independently in rows:

> **We don't have any technology still in the classroom. So that's the biggest change and how to teach, especially social studies and science curriculum where there's a lot of information needed and kids looking things up. There's no textbooks for it. So it's a lot of it, you might want to photocopy a worksheet. So there's a lot of worksheet driven stuff now, which I've never taught in my life before.**
>
> **When I talk to a lot of my colleagues, too, we joke, we're like, we're teaching like we're back in sort of the 1970s sort of thing where everyone gets handed a worksheet... Very 1970ish with, "Here's your worksheet. Work on this. You can't work with anybody else. Now put them in your duo tang." So teaching is not fun this year. I love doing group activities, kids building things, making things. That's non-existent.**
>
> (ETFO, elementary, 27)

This teacher provided details on the pedagogical impact of teaching in COVID times. Not only did they not have technology available due to the need for cleaning and quarantining all objects, this school also was not able to use physical education equipment, and any book used in the classroom needed to be borrowed and when brought back, left in a box for three days before any other students could use it. As the teacher described, the inability to use their normal classroom practice greatly affected their students, and also affected their personal sense of satisfaction in the profession.

At the same time, an elementary teacher from Manitoba described how they used the common experience of social distancing and masking protocols to try and deepen connections with their students:

> **[Students] – I don't know so much if they talk about what they miss. I guess they have, it's – they don't say I miss this, it's like, I wish we could do X. I hate that we have to wear masks. And I say to them, I hate it too. I mean they need to understand that it's not that I like it. It's not my favourite thing. But that's how we get to be at school. And whenever that comes up I validate their feelings, and then I say, but if we don't wear masks we have to do school at home. Did you like doing school at home? They did not.**
>
> (MTS, elementary, 24)

In general, the teachers we spoke with were happier to be in-person than online, with one exception where the educator was comfortable and quite content in the online space. Some of the concerns detailed in this section, such as the lack of connection to students, the forced pedagogical shifts to practices considered archaic, and overall lack of joy learning in pandemic classrooms permeated conversations. Enhanced safety protocols made it more difficult to connect with students and to provide a learning environment that was conducive to creative, fun, and enjoyable community-building play. Instead, teachers stated that the classroom felt sterile, lacking natural curiosity and positivity that is usually found in unrestricted learning contexts.

Pivot: Socially-distant Teaching and Learning

Regardless of the modality teachers were required to teach within, fostering, maintaining, and supporting important pedagogical connections with students were both a continued top priority and a point of emotional difficulty for the teachers we spoke with. As teachers described their experiences in the 2020-2021 school year, they shared a host of emotions that ranged from resignation to sadness, from frustration to determination. In these emotional reflections and experiences, teachers consistently showed how they held the connections with students as a vital component to quality public education, to their professional satisfaction and identity, and to the social and emotional development and support students need as developing young people.

An experienced primary teacher succinctly articulated these sentiments saying:

> **I'm going to tell you one thing, there is nothing that compares to being in the classroom for education. I will say that. It's – a teacher needs her stage. A teacher needs her classroom. And the kids need that, too.**
>
> (ATA, elementary, 12)

In more specific ways, teachers and education workers explained how socially distant teaching and learning affected their relationships with students and the space they share together that is so critical to quality, meaningful public education. The same teacher from ATA provided an example of what this looks like in a classroom:

> **Before COVID, every morning, I greeted my students with either a fist bump, a handshake, or a hug. I miss that tremendously. I have a lot of children that could use it.**
>
> (ATA, elementary, 12)

For teachers using online platforms, making those important connections with students carried added difficulties. A teacher in British Columbia described that with online teaching, "a lot of the kids were just lost between the cracks. The ones who weren't doing well just disappeared and we didn't even know where they were. It was really hard to get in touch" (BCTF, secondary, 7). Indeed, many of the teachers who had some experience teaching online during the 2020-2021 school year shared that was particularly challenging to connect and communicate with students to support them in their learning. A kindergarten teacher noted that in online education, "it seems like we're giving [students] more tools to be less successful" (BCTF, elementary, 19). In other words, although students might have had extra tech at their disposal, it was not necessarily conducive to student success, and in some cases, students were less successful because of the added technology. On the other hand, teachers did see that online environments benefited some students, yet disadvantaged others. Another teacher from British Columbia explained:

> **[Online learning] was beneficial for some students, the ones who were a bit more self-motivated, who might not have been doing so well at the beginning, they thrived, whereas others really struggled. At my school there are quite a few students with special needs, I'd say more than average for the city, and so that was a challenge because those students weren't getting the one-on-one help that they really needed and there was no way to really get it to them. We tried to be creative, but it was difficult, and I'm sure there's going to be long-lasting academic effects of that.**
>
> (BCTF, secondary, 7)

In these experiences, teachers and education workers showed that online teaching also exemplified the importance of connections between teachers and students for meaningful education. A teacher from Saskatchewan described the need to intentionally build community in online contexts, saying:

> **I have found that building a community, I mean it takes a lot of work and you have to be willing to try different things, right? And you have to try and I mean share stories, build those kind of things. It's definitely different than being in a classroom, than the face-to-face community that you build, but it is possible. Like, it's just different.**
>
> (STF, elementary, 30)

At the same time, as connections and building a classroom learning community required more intentionality for teachers online, it also opened up for other opportunities for connection beyond the classroom. An elementary teacher from Alberta reflected, "you learn a lot about your children when you're Zooming into their bedroom and house every day. And they learned a lot about me" (ATA, elementary, 12). A teacher in Manitoba also observed in online learning with primary students "there was a bit of that, having to support them in that [online] world and understanding how to be proper digital citizens" along with supporting curricular learning (MTS, elementary, 6).

Collegial (dis)connections

The important relationships teachers and education workers have with one another as colleagues were also affected by socially distant teaching and learning. In schools, social distancing due to COVID-19 health regulations often meant the social and physical spaces for teachers to eat, communicate, or take a break were eliminated, closed, or unavailable. Teachers explained that oftentimes, "the staff room [was] closed" (ETFO, 39), which resulted in teachers "going out and sitting in their cars" (NBTA, 44) to take a break. One teacher explained that their school district, "highly recommend that you eat in your car" (ETFO, 39) as they were not allowed to eat in the same room as their students and were "not even allowed to eat in the staff room together" (NBTA, 44). If they were allowed to remain in their classrooms they were, as a BCTF teacher described: "eating lunch in my room alone every day" (BCTF, secondary, 7).

Teachers described how the lack of social spaces made collaboration difficult, and it also made isolation more prominent. As an NBTA teacher explained "I have people in my building who work as colleagues who I see every two to three months, I don't see

them. That's hard. That also, that sense of community in our school, we just – it's hard to build that when you can't see your colleagues" (NBTA, elementary, 44).

Yet, teachers and education workers also spoke about the ways they were able to continue to collaborate and work together to support students even through social distancing or emergency response teaching. A secondary teacher from British Columbia provided an example of the tensions of isolation and collaboration, as they admitted:

> **We were used to just walking next door to the classroom next to yours and collaborating in that way, having a quick chat. So I was pretty isolated in my work-life, I didn't really talk to my colleagues. I mean there would be the occasional text but … I think because we weren't used to communicating in that way between us it was really very different. So yeah, I definitely felt disconnected.**
>
> (BCTF, secondary, 7)

Education workers found building community and keeping in touch with colleagues difficult in online spaces, but that also was true for teachers in school buildings, since they did not have a place to congregate to chat, eat lunch, share stories, or even debrief from their lessons. This was a further strain on teachers' normal support systems.

Pivot: Curricular expectations

As all stakeholders in public education attempted to navigate the rapidly changing contexts of the pandemic, curricular expectations were a key point of engagement. Teachers the RPL team spoke with iterated that decisions over curricular expectations for the 2020-2021 school year varied considerably across the country.

In some cases, Ministry exams were cancelled (QPAT, 13), and in other cases teachers were, "not expected to assess [students] when we give report cards to them. It's all anecdotal" (BCTF, 26). Those teachers who remained responsible for standardized student assessment tended to "disagree with the report cards, the format, for a grade" (ETFO, 15) because in many cases, students "submitted nothing" (OSSTF/FEESO, 18). In other cases, teachers and education workers recognized the added stress for students and for themselves in attempting to keep pace with curricular expectations during the pandemic, and often opted to focus more of their attention towards providing robust feedback (OSSTF/FEESO, 17), monitoring attendance (NBTA, 25), or developing social emotional skills (MTS, 6), and less attention towards formal assessment and covering all curricular

expectations. For others still, they found the changing circumstances of class size and composition because of health and safety protocols actually meant they could continue at the "regular" curricular pace (YAEP, 16).

Then again, modality changes also made certain types of curricular content delivery difficult, if not impossible. One teacher lamented:

> **My history class is a locally developed grade 10 history. That course is all dependant on making that personal connection with students. And it's – it just is literally impossible. It's just – the curriculum is not being delivered to those students to those students the way it should be.**
>
> (OSSTF/FEESO, secondary, 19)

Education workers explained that the shift to online teaching and learning in particular meant they had to rethink what students need to know, and paring down their course design to the core curriculum outcomes with a focus on the learning standards that students needed to succeed in subsequent courses. In some cases, teachers felt supported in their mission (QPAT, elementary, 1), while in other cases, "The government has not said to teachers… that the curriculum is to be modified to really meet the needs of the students where they are." (ETFO, elementary teacher, 15).

Despite assiduous effort to "get curriculum covered" (STF, 30), be "a good educator", and help "students to succeed" (OSSTF/FEESO, 18), teachers also recognized as one teacher put it, that they "can't really push the kids any further because I don't want to stress them out" (QPAT, secondary, 13). Students' increased stress related to academic performance was not an isolated experience, as one teacher remarked, "even my highest-performing students shut down when I said there was a deadline. They just couldn't handle it; it was too much stress" (MTS, elementary, 6). When students' stress increased and participation in class decreased it would cause, as the MTS teacher further stated, "…a new kind of stress" for teachers who had to navigate this precarious balance" (MTS, 6). This was particularly pronounced as teachers discussed assessment.

Modality move: Assessment

The importance of assessment, and the intimate understanding of student learning, was strongly discussed in our conversations. Many education workers expressed their frustration over their inability to provide valuable assessment for learning. In particular, the inability to converse with students, to *see* their understanding in their faces made honest assessment difficult or at times impossible, especially when students were not handing in any work, or in secondary contexts, when students would not open their cameras online. This was made clear by teachers in all learning contexts we spoke with. An ATA teacher admitted, for instance:

> **I have to tell you that not being able to see my children's faces, it's hard, it's hard, because that's somehow how you know if they're understanding.**
> (ATA, elementary, 12)

Another specialist teacher described an experience that illustrated the complexities of equitable pedagogy, the learning environment, and providing needs assessments during the pandemic:

> **For some of them, they're living in a small apartment with multiple kids, so we've been having conversations about, you know, how can we provide a small workplace for your kid where there's less distraction? Or would it be an option for your kid to be working offline and just join the class at different social points for that piece? Just to get them having some form of engagement rather than none…There's so much out of our control. I was assessing a little guy today, and he was just so distracted the entire time and we're constantly asking him to refocus, come look at the camera, stop playing with your mic, stop hitting the ruler to the camera…it's just stuff like that. Whereas if we were in the classroom, I would just take the ruler away [laughs] Right? Or we'd have physical incentives right in front of us that we could then use to just kind of reward him as we're going for just those small positive behaviours, whereas there's nothing I can really work with there. So, I can understand the teacher's frustration when you have a student who is disrupting the class and it's just out of your control.**
> (ETFO, elementary specialist, 21)

The physical, social interactions required for meaningful pedagogy and assessment also put teachers and education workers in tension-laden positions where they had to choose between their own health and safety, and quality assessment. A teacher in Manitoba provided for example: "What is hard is things, like reading assessments where I would normally sit right with the kid and we'd share a book and I would watch

them read it and you know, I'm not – because I have health issues, I'm not comfortable sitting that close to a student" (MTS, elementary, 24). Due to health concerns, this teacher was not able to sit in close enough proximity to be able to properly assess, and teach, literacy skills.

Online learning contexts, where students often were simply names on black screens, further highlighted the importance of physicality, present-ness, and the social relationships teachers build and depend on to make informed assessments and feedback for students, as well as quality and meaningful lessons. A teacher from OSSTF/FEESO rhetorically asked:

> **How can I possibly adapt my lesson or the question or the anecdote or the story or the whatever else, how do I adapt it when I can't see their face to know that if they've got that. And if the only form of assessment is some written thing that they're doing online and putting in the Drop Box, it's too late.**
>
> (OSSTF/FEESO, secondary, 19)

The pivot to online learning pushed some teachers to question the purpose and role of assessments, as many did not feel they could accurately assess student learning and engagement through virtual platforms. In another instance, an educator felt that their ability to assess was being judged, as its validity was questioned when they offered extra student support:

> **I was questioned a lot this year because I was providing my own assessments, I was questioned about the validity of my assessments. Because I was offering more support to my students, I was questioned about the validity of classroom learnings.**
>
> (PEITF, secondary, 2)

Another teacher from Alberta also reflected on rethinking their assessment practices, including the use of online platforms to help with assessment:

I've certainly had to rethink a lot of the ways I assess, because children tend to be absent a little bit more. I've thrown more choice onto the table when the kids do work, because we've become so – the kids and I have become able to communicate via online or in person. So, I will always offer a virtual option. I love Google Classroom, and I can – I'll assign a writing assignment and I'll do it via Google Classroom, and whether they're there or not, I can still look at their writing and correct it and give them comments. So, I'm using technology more than I ever would have.

(ATA, elementary, 12)

While some solutions revolved around eliminating deadlines, altering assignment expectations, and adjusting standards, incontestably, teachers put less emphasis on academics and more emphasis on relationship-building to help manage students' stress levels. As one teacher explained:

I don't want to be too hard on the kids during this time as well. But our administration still expects all these things to be done, but I just – you know, I pick and choose, and health and safety is going to come first.

(QPAT, secondary, 13)

Yet, as teachers and education workers made decisions to support relationships with students, they had to balance the pressure from various levels of administration to keep up with the many other aspects of their work. A teacher in New Brunswick described the stress of navigating and attempting to balance these tensions saying:

> **I teach math and trying to learn math from your house while watching your teacher online is – [students are] having a hard time with it. And so, then, everybody's – they're all coming to me for extra help, and I don't even have a second in the day to be able to support them that way. And I'm trying, but this is one thing that came up before our March Break this week is, you know, the principal, well, you have to support your students, you have to find the time. You have to give up your lunch hour, you have to do this, you have to do that.**
>
> (NBTA, secondary, 25)

In this instance, the teacher was being asked to find time that they did not have available in their schedule. In the same interview, they later described that they were told by their administrator they were not supporting their students enough when they were unable to provide the extra help, which they described as a "slap in the face" (NBTA, secondary, 25). It was a "slap in the face" for two reasons: because they were working so hard to support their students already, and because that work was not considered to be enough by their administrator.

Teachers were faced with making impossible decisions that swirled around their personal mental health and well-being, that of their students, and their professional, social, institutional, and personal expectations for teachers in public education. The circumstances in making these decisions pivoted regularly, carrying teachers on a *not so* merry-go-round of responsive pedagogy, intensifying workload, and deteriorating mental health and well-being.

Slowing the spin: Lessons, boundaries, and survival

Many of the teachers the RPL team had the privilege to speak with relayed stories of decision making that consistently showed their dedication to their profession. It was a dedication to place good pedagogy over personal health that drew deeply on teachers' resilience and creative abilities to foster and maintain connections with students over distances and classroom distancing. But this dedication was often taken for granted by parents/guardians, administrators, district officials, and Ministries or Departments of Education. Teachers and education workers spoke of the cost of the pivots in terms of hard lessons in continually being adaptable, and when to speak up and draw boundaries for their own, and their colleagues,' mental health and survival.

For some teachers, they made difficult decisions to continue to support students in their learning through, or even despite, risks. A teacher from Alberta said:

> I do not stay two meters away from my students. I cannot teach them two meters away from them. I have to be sitting right beside them to help them with a math problem or to listen to them read. And … I tried, I tried the first week, but it's just not the way that I can do my job.
> (ATA, elementary, 12)

A teacher from Manitoba spoke of their experience of going the literal 'extra mile' to make connections with his isolated rural students. They explained:

> **I visited every student in-person too at least once and I just went and visited them and we had little porch visits. And it was just really cool to see how kids lived, where they lived, connecting with parents out on the porch one-on-one. Going for the bike rides; getting to know them in a casual way. Some parents invited me to have some food with them on their like patio or porch or whatever. [...]**
>
> **Parents were just going with what was coming, and they just loved how much of a connection that was happening and that I was, you know, reaching out to their sons and daughters. And yeah, the relationship just felt like I was an adult who was taking care of their kids and having fun with their kids, and there was a trust there that was different than what they do when they drop their kids off at school each day.**
>
> (MTS, elementary, 6)

Another teacher from Manitoba offered a very different experience. They described the strain and difficulty of finding and establishing boundaries to support quality pedagogy in online teaching to the point of needing to gather as colleagues to overtly voice their concerns and seek adjustments.

> **So in February I started talking to other schools to see what – or in January – what they were doing for online learning. And contrary to what [we] had been being told by our principal that it had to be the classroom teacher, other schools were doing different things. [...]**
>
> **And so with [a staff meeting] coming up, the week before that I went to each teacher individually and said, this is what I'm thinking of suggesting. What are your feelings on it? Will you support me if I bring it forward to the staff meetings? Everybody agreed. They all thought it was great. Then we started the staff meeting and I said – I thought, I'm not going to pull any punches. I said, we need to make a change to remote learning because out teachers are breaking. They are stressed to the maximum, the classroom teachers are carrying the majority of the load, and they can't do it anymore. So we need to make a change.**
>
> **And [the principal] talked about well, there's expectations from the division. And I said, I**

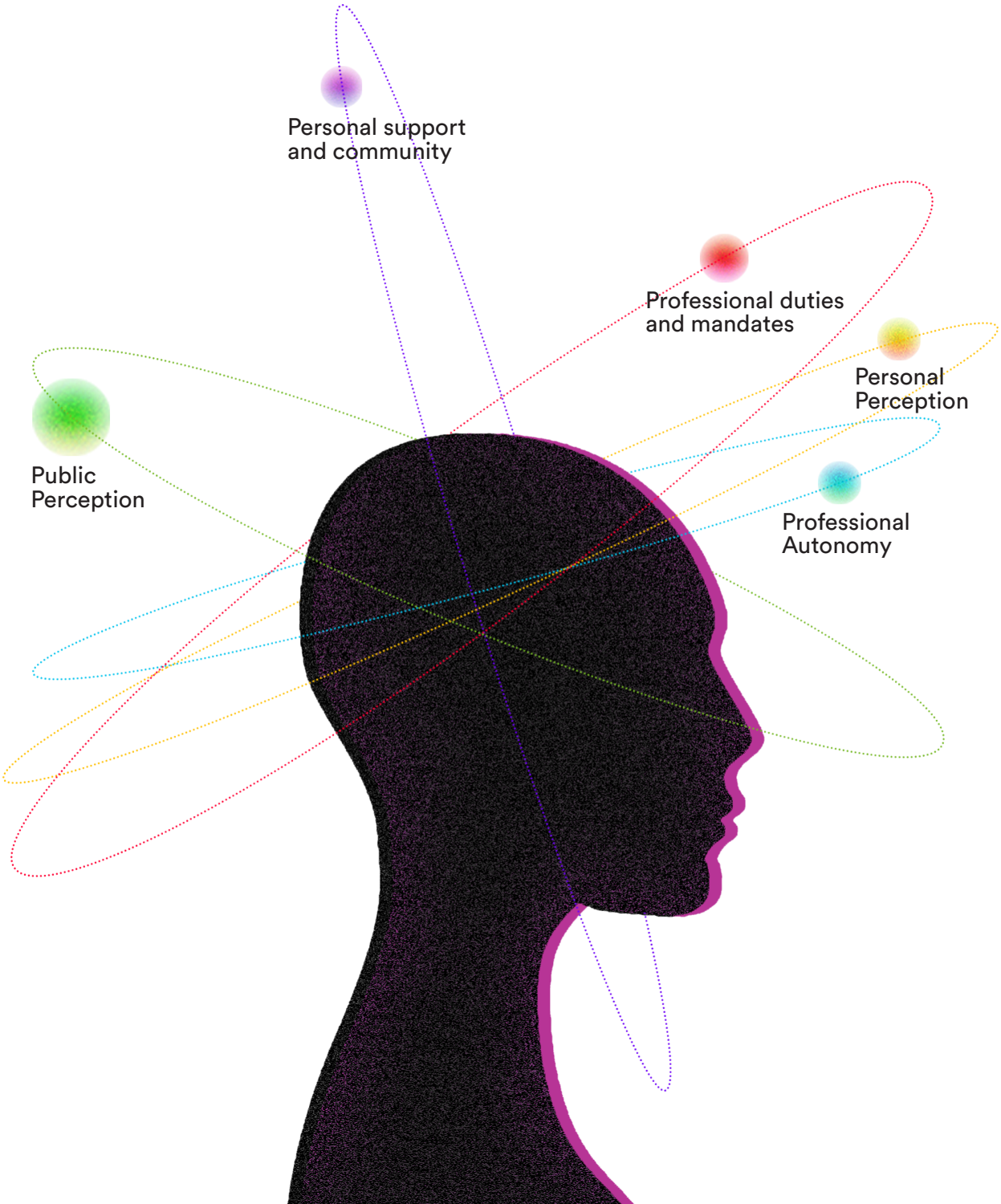
understand that, but we need to make a change because your teachers are breaking. And I just kept repeating that. And then finally someone else chimed in. It took a long time before the people I asked to support me felt – I think it's scary, right? To say something against what your principal's saying.

But one of our most stalwart teachers happens to be my teaching partner, started talking about how we're not meeting the needs of the kids that are online and we know it. [...] And she's a very stoic kind of person and she broke down and started to cry. And I think that – I mean it's horrible that she felt that way, but I think it helped. And so, then the principal said, well if you guys can come up with a schedule that works. And I went, well, boom, it's done.

(MTS, elementary, 24)

This teacher's story provided a glimpse into the complex difficulties teachers across the country experienced in attempting to pivot to the changing contexts of the pandemic. Many teachers did not have the ability to "collect themselves" or gather together and voice their concerns as this teacher did. What was consistent was that the cascade of pivots teachers undertook because of the pandemic not only meant "reinventing the wheel" to an emergency pedagogy that was distanced, online or hybrid, that was limited in interactive resources and institutional supports, and that changed their assessment practices, interactions with students, parents, and colleagues. The cascade of changes also brought with it uncertainty with new (and in some cases, retro) pedagogies, curricular content and assessment, feelings of concern and anxiety around the continued enforcement of sanitation and distancing protocols, frustration over lack of support, sadness and guilt over the difficulties of maintaining high standards of pedagogy in terms of differential instruction and assessments, interactive lessons, and meaningful learning. The cascade of pivots in teachers' pedagogies, and the workload intensification felt by all teachers across the country brought on by the pandemic also caused changes through the ways in which teachers understood themselves as professionals, working within the broader institution of education.

Professional Orbits: Staying Centered in a Whirlwind



As education workers shouldered increasing workloads and the need to constantly shift their pedagogies, the world also grappled with life in a pandemic. Societally, public education was in the spotlight, as many classrooms moved online, virtually supplanted into education workers' and students' homes. Teachers were the center of attention in many families' lives: they were technology support, a lifeline to the education system, and a source of support and connection during times of lengthy disconnection.

In this spotlight, educators were lauded as heroes while at the same time they also endured ongoing waves of negative public perceptions of the profession through social media and public discourses. This fluctuating societal support weighed heavily on many educators who felt misunderstood and left to juggle their professional obligations as well as personal and public perceptions of their work life, leading many to question why they remain in the profession.

These complexities point to a sphere of influence in teachers' professional lives. In this sphere of influence, complex and interrelated factors such as professional obligations handed down through rigid mandates, the loss of autonomy through deprofessionalization, and lack of communication and/or respect from Ministries or Departments of Education steadily "orbited" around education workers. Although many of these factors are external to teachers' daily lives, during the pandemic such pressures were experienced as additional, demoralizing, and influential burdens in an already tense time.

Organized through some of the orbits that swirl around the teaching profession, in what follows, education workers describe professional breaking points, experience with feeling infantilized and disrespected, while at the same time figuring out coping strategies in an attempt to distance themselves from negative external influences. Through these experiences, teachers discussed the complexities of the orbiting elements, their immediate and potentially longer-term after-effects, and importance of these factors in a holistic understanding of teacher mental health and well-being.

Orbit of Obligations

In our interviews, education workers told us that some of the most frustrating aspects of teaching during the pandemic were the mandates, obligations, and lack of flexibility from their employer, especially when that lack of flexibility came from not understanding what the job is like on the ground. Over 75% of the interviewees discussed how they were being held back from truly helping students because of externally mandated constraints, and how they needed to put their focus on non-essential tasks like logging their own hours to justify their jobs. One teacher described how the micromanaging of their time "from above," created undue pressure:

> **It's not about the academics right now at all...it's not even a focus. But then it's funny because the school division started to ask us to log our hours and how we were spending our days and our time. And they also wanted data collection. And so, there was pressure coming from above that was ridiculous.**
>
> (MTS, elementary, 6)

The feeling of "pressure from above," meaning expectations from the employer, was a thread throughout many of the interviews. The *CTF/FCE Teacher Mental Health Check-in Survey* report echoes these findings, where over one third (34%) of education workers who responded to the October 2020 survey found "meeting personal and professional obligations" was "severely draining" on their mental health and well-being. Educators felt limited in their abilities to help the students in their care because they also needed to walk a fine line in dedicating time and energy to any and all asks from their employer.

Many of these extra tasks micromanaged teachers' work, such as logging hours, and placed additional pressure on teachers to complete work that was simply for obligation's sake. In turn, these added tasks were taking away precious time and energy from teaching, and/or were overwhelming in scope. One educator described this sentiment for the implementation of Ontario's new elementary math curriculum that was rolled out in fall 2020:

> **I worry that it's not a positive impact. Because of the time, right? The best way I can describe the feeling is that it feels like the government and sadly the Board of Education right now, it's like they have their**

foot on my neck and they haven't taken the pressure off, in addition to teaching children and parents during a time in their lives when they're struggling.

(ETFO, elementary, 15)

Describing the additional work to create brand new resources for a curriculum that many teachers had not received adequate training to implement, this educator questioned the intent of the Ministry for choosing the pandemic to mandate a new curriculum, and therefore place the additional implementation work on educators. This educator depicted the extra work as feeling like a "foot on her neck." Not only is this a stark image, but it expresses the feeling of being beholden to choices that are being made outside of one's professional control, yet, needing to heed to the decisions, nonetheless. Another education worker explained this as being subservient, and following orders at any cost:

I don't think we'll ever be back to where we were, partly because I think every time, they throw something at us everybody, we, like little minions, do exactly as we're told and they've been pushing people to the max. So, we're all like, they're going to just keep pushing, I feel like there's a huge boundary piece that the board says jump and you jump, the government says, do this and you do this.

(ETFO, elementary, 39)

Calling education workers "little minions," this educator worker explained that pandemic work felt like needing to "jump" when asked to jump. In other words, to fulfill any and all requests without any thought or opinion of one's own as a professional, and simply responding to demands. As they noted, such orders and directives "push people to the max," which they feared will be normalized post-pandemic. Another such example of having professional and personal boundaries pushed by the employer revolved around being expected to work even on medical leave.

In three instances, out of the 32 interviews we conducted, teachers mentioned they were asked to continue aspects of their workloads like assessments and reporting while on leave or sick. An AEFO elementary teacher explained for instance, even when they were on sick leave, "I was still responsible to contribute to the progress report card in November" (35). Another participant described how there was no recourse when the employer pushed their work-life boundaries, either through additional work, or having personal boundaries crossed. Even when their union was involved, they were left feeling exasperated and without agency. Due to the drastic shift in working conditions, including working out of one's home, online, or even in classrooms, education workers were on shaky ground with knowing what their rights and obligations were in a time of turmoil.

As one teacher explained, their anxiety and frustrations emanated from:

> **Just not understanding all of those boundaries and not understanding our position and our rights. I mean, many of us contacted our union several times over, but we were basically told, this is what your employer's telling you to do and you have to do it. So, it's been an exhausting, difficult year, and I'll get upset, sorry.**
>
> (NBTA, secondary, 25)

When expressing frustrations around their employer not having an understanding of their personal and professional boundaries, or not being able to push back against mandates and obligations that seemed unfair, several education workers became visibly upset, some choked back tears, and others broke down and cried. As the teacher above explained, feeling alone in such a difficult time, and not having choice or agency in your profession was exhausting.

On top of the job of being an educator, having external pressures and expectations placed on one's shoulders contributed significantly to emotional distress and frustration. The same secondary teacher from New Brunswick described the frustration as not having a voice, and feeling like education workers were not able to make any of their own decisions:

> **Our voice... Like, we can't make any decisions. You know, we are being told what to do from a government employee, and that scares me. It scares me the direction that we're going in. Our contract was up last week, that scares me, that we have a new contract coming up. And given how things have gone this year, it concerns me that our voice is gone as a group of professionals. Like, our voice is gone. And that scares the hell out of me and many of us.**
> (NBTA, secondary, 25)

This teacher reiterated four times how scary it was to feel like they no longer have a voice as a professional, how they felt that this was the new normal, and how unstable it felt as they were in the midst of negotiating a new contract. Such concerns lay outside of the boundaries of "teaching," yet, have a significant impact on the teaching profession collectively, and on individuals within the profession, since all were subjected to mandates, professional obligations, and duties that they might or might not agree with, or felt were above and beyond their already stressful workloads. In the following section, education workers described how they have felt their professionalism slipping away from them, which was a second orbit of concern the ongoing, worrisome, deprofessionalization of teaching occurring across the country.

Orbit of Deprofessionalization

Teachers consistently stated one of the most difficult aspects of working during the pandemic in the 2020-2021 school year was navigating changes to their profession beyond their control. These included a host of elements that informed their everyday workload and pedagogy as discussed in the previous sections, but also their sense of autonomy in making judgements in their areas of expertise due to the intensification of restrictions, guidelines, and top-down control by Ministries or Departments of Education, and Public Health. Many education workers explained that navigating being micro-managed and overworked was compounded with a lack of trust for their employer to do their job as a professional, leaving them feeling disrespected and exhausted. As an experienced teacher put it:

Obviously, these are completely unprecedented times, and we understand how challenging all of these rules and regulations must be to make, and we know that education and contact for the kids is so important, like, no teachers I know are, like, 'let's stop educating them, or let's get everything online' – all of us love teaching, all the people I speak to. And we completely believe that education is life-changing and eye-opening and a huge part of what makes people successful individuals. And we feel like we have been lied to and hobbled by the regulations coming out from people who have no idea what it's like on the ground floor.

(BCTF, secondary, 9)

In their discussion, this secondary educator described the complex emotional and professional tensions that teachers grappled with over the course of the pandemic: at one hand, they continued to love their job, deeply believing in the transformative power of education, *and* on the other hand, felt like they were not trusted as a professional. Employer support, professional understanding, and autonomy was lacking to the point this educator said they felt "hobbled" by regulations, as these were far removed from their experience in the classroom, "the ground floor", and dictated by people they do not have any knowledge of teaching. This led them to feel as though they have been injured, and prevented from doing work to their own professional standards. Teachers who responded to the *CTF/FCE Teacher Mental Health Check-in survey* noted as well that upholding professional standards was a great source of stress and emotional exhaustion. About one-third indicated that upholding personal professional standards was "very frustrating" (32%) and "greatly affected" their emotional health and well-being (34%). One education worker discussed how part of their frustration and exhaustion was attributed to the inflexibility in being micromanaged by their employer:

And this year, I found that the assumption that I'm going to be working from home or putting in extra hours or stuff kind of stuck without the flexibility. And you can't – one of those has to go, right? You can either command all of my time from 9:00 to 5:00, or you can make me an independent person who gets to choose my hours and I can give you some of my off-time. But, yeah, you can't micromanage every minute and also expect me to be available after hours.
(YAEP, secondary, 16).

In this instance, the discussion centered around feeling two incommensurate requests: the teacher being micromanaged, and at the same time expected to work above and beyond their contracted hours. As they stated, they did not want to give their employer both full control of what their work, and all their time. Relinquishing both time and ability to manage that time to the employer did not provide any professional autonomy, freedom of judgement, or flexibility in their work. The educator's use of the word "command" is also an important qualifier here. Much like the sentiments of teachers noting the distinctions from "the ground floor" (9), and feeling like "little minions" (39), this educator's use of "command" implies a hierarchical relationship with the teacher following orders, instead of having professional autonomy. As an example, another educator described how they felt their professionalism was being questioned with the use of sign-in sheets at work:

The superintendents and directors…it felt like they didn't trust us, and I felt like that from our division for a while. And other teachers I know felt the same way – I think we're the only school division for instance that has to sign in every day as like an attendance when we get to work… it just didn't feel like we were being treated as professionals.
(MTS, elementary, 6)

Mechanisms like sign-ins, much like punching a timeclock as an hourly wage earner, were understood to emerge from a lack of trust, in this case directed from those in leadership positions outside of their school. They also add that the lack of trust was not new, and has felt like that way "for a while," meaning that even before the pandemic, they were experiencing a lack of respect as professionals. During the pandemic, however, a lack of trust from the employer and the increasing unease with the erosion of their sense of autonomy weighed heavily on teachers' well-being and professional outlook. One education worker described how their job felt more like a "daycare" than a place of learning: "It really feels like we're just being used as a daycare so that other people can go to work, and that irritates me a lot (BCTF, secondary, 7)." They described feeling "irritated" and "used" as a professional pandemic protocols often meant that parents/guardians could only continue to work if their children were in care – for school-aged children, this meant being in school. As such, there was an orbiting pressure on teachers and education workers to keep the economy going[32] even as they were micromanaged, felt mistrusted, and unsupported to do so by their employers. These simmering feelings of mistrust, not being heard or made to feel like a professional, were discussed in many of the interviews, and illustrated a tightening tension in the orbit between education workers' need for professional autonomy, and the increasing control and micro-management they experienced from their employers teaching during the pandemic.

Entangled in the concept of professionalism was how employers, including Boards/Districts and Ministries/Departments of Education communicated changes to staff. In several instances, and across provinces, education workers found out about major shifts to their jobs during the pandemic through social media and/or did not receive information from their employer until after public announcements had been made:

> **There's all these big changes that happen that everyone else, with parents included, find out before we do. And then, we look like we're clueless and out of the loop and kind of just left, "Oh, like, we didn't know that, no one told us anything." And it's, like, all over the news or whatever**
>
> (ETFO, elementary, 28)

> **We were very upset. Our government has – our employer – has sprung several changes on us last minute that we have found out through**

email or through the media at the same time as other people. So, when we received that, we were in the middle of classes and then we were expected to continue on like we were prepared for it, and we weren't. We weren't. Yeah. I don't – everything is overwhelming. Everything.
(NBTA, secondary, 25)

The first teacher, from Ontario, noted a sense of embarrassment as they felt like they looked unprofessional, or "clueless" because they did not know what changes were being made. Instead, it was "all over the news," which added to an already tense relationship with the employer. Such decisions in communicating changes to the school system during the pandemic frustrated education workers, and since they were the ones in charge of implementing said changes, this left them very little time to react. It also increased stress, deepened an already basement-level of trust with the employer, and created more distance between stakeholders in the education system at a time where cohesion was sorely needed.

The second quotation from a New Brunswick educator echoed these sentiments, as they noted that teachers were "very upset." The issue of finding out at the same time as the public was shocking for both educators above, which illustrates the importance of professional and respectful communication for teachers to feel prepared, informed, and supported. It also poignantly shows what happens when employers do not take professionalism into account. The expectation that education workers should be able to switch their practice within hours or days, and also be okay receiving such information through informal channels like social media does not take seriously the professional relationship between the employer and educators, and the needs of educators as professionals. As the teacher described, it was "overwhelming." These casual and unprofessional methods of communication added further external pressures to their day-to-day job, continued to psychological take up space and orbit around them, adding another "unknown" factor to anticipate in an already uncertain time.

The description from the educator from New Brunswick, that "everything is overwhelming," points to the long-term effects of being an educator in the pandemic: the accumulation of stressors over time decreases education workers' abilities to continually cope with shifts, leading to feelings of being overwhelmed, especially when lacking support, respect, and appreciation from their employer. A

British Columbian teacher described this relationship to the government as "feeling like they don't care about us, and it's just been disheartening…they just keep fighting us at every turn, and I wish they would be a little bit more understanding, empathetic about the situation" (BCTF, secondary, 7). Indeed, this reflected the *CTF/FCE Teacher Mental Health Check-in survey* results, where, on average, 60% of educators across the country felt "not supported" by their Ministry or Department of Education.

Experiencing long-term deprofessionalization, and continually navigating top-down mandates without much flexibility has left many education workers questioning their place in the profession, with some looking for new career options, and others unsure what to do with their sense of disillusionment. In other words, educators are experiencing strong tensions within not only the employee-employer relationships and mandates of their profession, but also their personal perception of the profession, which has been brought to the fore and intensified in the pandemic.

Orbit of Personal Perception

In the interviews, education workers were asked about their personal attachment to their work, including their level of satisfaction, and how the profession fits in with their personal life. What came from these conversations was a mix of sentiments. Firstly, teachers love to teach, and they live for the joy of connecting with students. However, the pandemic has pulled back the curtain on the growing distance between their idealized version of their work, and the reality of their jobs, leaving many to question their future in a profession.

In this section, teachers described how their perception of their job has shifted over the course of the pandemic, and how this is affected their emotional and physical well-being. In some cases, sadly, the conversations revealed that educators had pushed their bodies to the limit, and they went on leave for medical reasons. In other cases, teachers pushed through, even though they felt defeated, and although they longed for a profession they felt no longer aligned with their passions for educating. One teacher from Quebec explained working in a pandemic as "Groundhog Day":

You don't get that sense of feeling good at the end of the day. I remember there'd be days or classes you'd feel really good about, oh, wow, that went really well, or you just have that sense of enjoyment or even if things didn't go well, you would have that time to reflect and figure things out. But now, it just it feels like Groundhog Day; it's just like everything is the same every day, and you're just trying to get through your day in one piece...And I don't get that sense of enjoyment and fulfillment like I used to which – I don't like to feel like I'm just getting through my day. But it's just like that's my survival mode, I guess.

(QPAT, secondary, 13)

This education worker explained the lack of positive feedback from lessons, or not having their usual sense of fulfillment or enjoyment has led to feeling like every day is the same as the last. Being in "survival mode" and getting through the day in "one piece" was a thread for several participants. It

showed how much teachers found the parts of educating that supported their well-being and professional fulfillment were eroded, downplayed, or simply not given time and space during the pandemic. Another teacher noted that it feels like their shared passions have been "stripped away":

It's like the only part of being a teacher that's left is the teaching. But, all of the wonderful parts of sharing education and collaborating and working together and, sharing your passions, they've just been stripped away.

(BCTF, secondary, 9)

In every interview, education workers reiterated why they loved to teach, and made sure to note this at least once in the conversation. However, as the conversations progressed, the idyllic versions of teaching became frayed, and all began to tell more difficult stories: their emotional struggles staying connected to the profession, and how they were navigating their shifting personal perceptions of teaching. Like the teacher in British Columbia above, who described that all the "wonderful" parts of educating - the collaborative and community aspects of the profession - were diminishing, and therefore deteriorating, their professional satisfaction, another educator put it this way:

I am more interested in ticking the box to make sure I cover it and say, OK I did do that, which is not how I roll, so it's – I struggle every day, because I know that I'm not doing what I, what my heart wants to be doing.

(ETFO, elementary, 39)

Their job was no longer how they normally operated, or how they "roll." They had to change the way they worked, affecting their connection to the profession. Their "struggle" in this sense was much less about the work that needed to be done, as they explained, they completed their work that needed to be covered, but more so the creative, connective, and emotional aspects of teaching were gone. Teaching had been stripped down to making sure a list of duties was completed. As a professional who centered their work around the lives of the children they teach and in providing meaningful experiences, this shift is not only detrimental to their pedagogy, but to their sense of well-being and satisfaction in the profession. Similarly, a further Ontario teacher described how coming to terms with the reality of the profession has "broken their spirit":

> **I love being a teacher. I'm super passionate about, you know, being this person that can get a student from point A to point B. It's, like, I get a lot of purpose in my life. And so, the fact that I was sitting and having discussions about career changes really, like, broke my spirit a bit.**
>
> (ETFO, elementary, 28)

Like many of the interview participants, this educator reiterated their strong connection to teaching as an important part of their identity, and the difficulty of dealing with the emotional impact of questioning the place of this work in their life. For some, this has led to leaves from the profession, and for others, it has prompted conversations around early retirement:

> **If I could retire tomorrow, I would. I would. And it's sad, because every single one of us – every single person that I know out of my colleagues and my friends who – I have a lot of friends as colleagues, we've become close through this – every bit of enjoyment has been taken from our profession. Every bit. And when you become a teacher, you do it because you want to. It's not a job that you can do unless you want to...But every bit of enjoyment has been sucked out of our profession. And that's sad.**
>
> (NBTA, secondary, 25)

Once again, this teacher reiterated sentiments expressed in various ways by many of the educator workers we spoke with in the interviews - that all "enjoyment" had been stripped from the profession during the pandemic. The idea that given the chance they would retire, and that, anecdotally, many of their teacher-friends are feeling similarly, should be a call for concern. Taken as a whole, education workers from across Canada have made comments about the change in the profession during the pandemic, and how it is increasingly affecting their ability to stay meaningfully connected to their work. In severe cases, educators have pushed themselves to the limit, and have needed to take leaves from the job. As one teacher described, they continued to work until it was physically impossible:

On International Teacher's Day, October the 5th, well I was vomiting in my car [laughter...] That's how bad it was, yeah. And I was having heart palpitations and everything. And I called my doctor from my car and said, "I can't do this." I said, "I can't do this." And I went to my school principal on the Wednesday, and he had enough stuff on his plate. And I said to him, "you know, I'm not here to dump more on your plate. I'm simply here to tell you that I'm not making it." And I said, "I don't know how much longer I can last." And then that Friday, my doctor put me on medical leave...

(AEFO, elementary, 35)

This teacher experienced adverse reactions to long-term stressors, leading to physical and mental health issues, which the pandemic greatly exacerbated. In this case, they were more concerned about "putting more on the plate" of their administrator than accessing support from leadership. As noted in many interviews, teachers were also concerned with the workloads and stresses placed on administration. This was even to the point where they tried their hardest to not further burden leadership and take on extra pressure to alleviate their workloads. In this case, the teacher was unwell to the extent of no longer being able to function, and still was cognizant of their administrator's work even when they were sick. Through these efforts, education workers lived on the edge of burnout. When discussing burnout, one Manitoba educator talked about wanting to quit over the holiday break, but with over 30 years of experience, felt like this was "giving up":

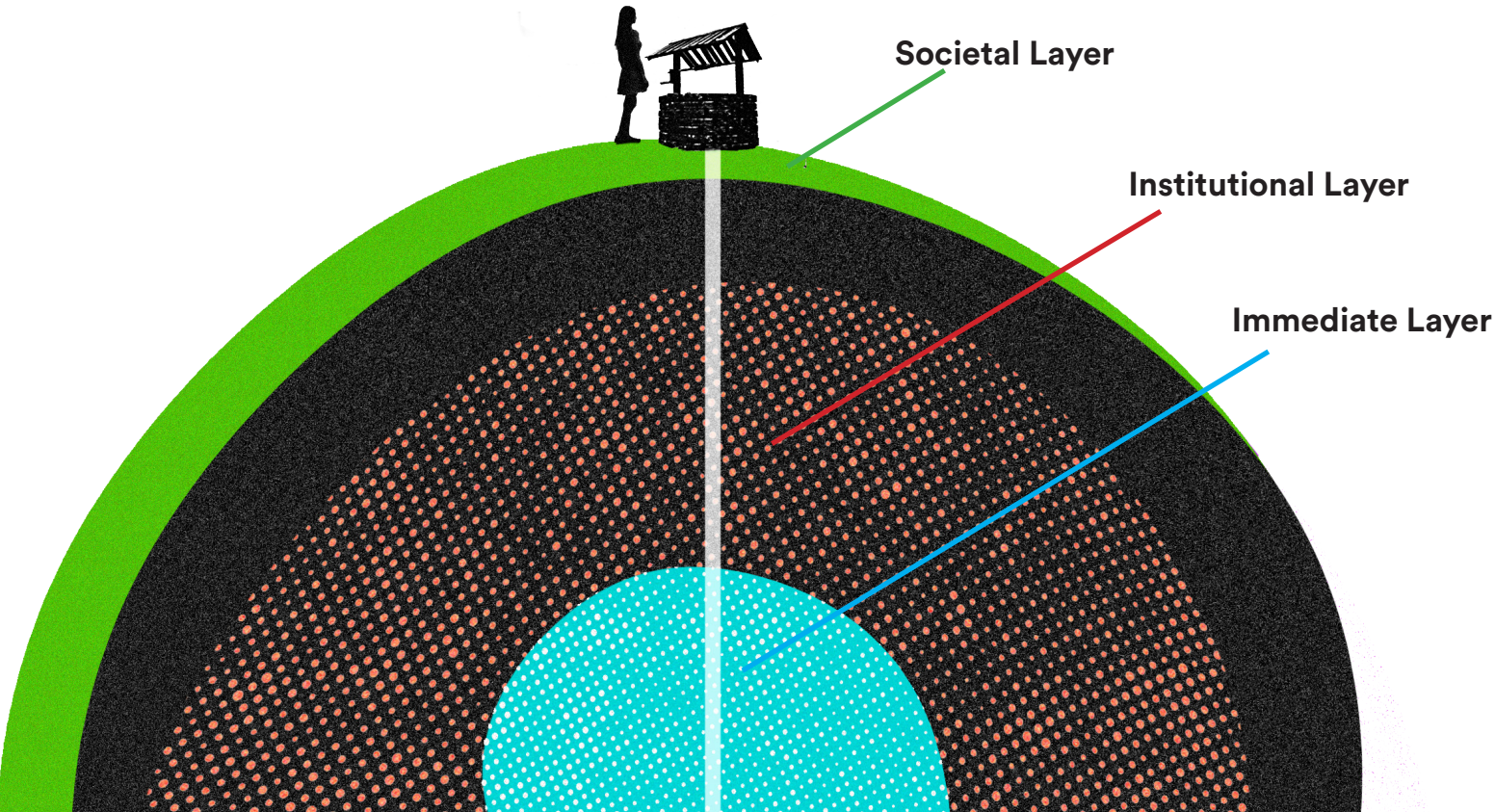
Well, I know that over Christmas I just felt like quitting. And I just, a lot of anxiety, and, oh my God, I can't go back, I can't do this... we can't do the best that we want to do. I don't know... what I'm doing not to burn out is I just try and survive one day at a time. That's my goal. Just surviving one day at a time. I live – I live for the weekend... I don't know how else to say about burnout. I don't want to get there. I want to end my job and my career with my head held high. I don't want to give up.

(MTS, elementary, 14)

Even when struggling with mental and physical health issues, including exhaustion and anxiety, many teachers explained that they did not want to "give up", or had strong feelings of guilt attached to taking any leave or personal time away from the classroom. In this instance, the teacher focused on "surviving one day at a time," and much like others have noted, there was a strong sense of defeat or loss in admitting that a personal limit had been reached.

The orbit of personal perception, including personal boundaries, health and wellness, and job satisfaction is complex, and layered. Education workers discussed their experiences in working through the pandemic, in explaining the effects on their own lives, but at the same time they questioned the place and purpose of the profession in the midst of upheaval and drastic changes to their work. When analyzed alongside obligations, mandates, public perceptions, social media, and employer relationships, the professional orbits that hover around teachers also have long term effects in their work and personal lives. These aspects intersect to create increased stress when educators do not feel supported by their employer, leading to long term dissatisfaction and disconnection from the joy they normally feel working with students. Like the shifts in pedagogy and affects from workload, the external pressures teachers tried to juggle also had long term consequences, and these should be taken into account when discussing mental health and well-being. Further, engaging with the complexity of factors that affect mental health, and finding holistic ways of understanding all aspects connected to mental health are needed to better support education workers.

Conclusion: From Pillars of Influence to an Ecology of Experience



In the *CTF/FCE Teacher Mental Health Check-in Survey* report (October 2020), we concluded that several layers of influence affect teacher mental health and well-being: the societal layer (e.g., social determinants of health, pandemic stress and uncertainty, the teaching profession), institutional layer (e.g., school board and Ministry leadership, health and safety policies and protocols), and the immediate layer (e.g., preparation time, personal coping skills, collegial supports). Even though we explained each of the three layers for analytical clarity, the layers do not separate easily in practice, as they are interconnected and interdependent.

Through the qualitative interview process, we have come to similar conclusions, as our results are greatly aligned with data from the fall 2020 survey. In both instances, we have found that Canadian education workers' experiences teaching through the COVID-19 pandemic are intimately connected to their mental health and sense of well-being.

Noting this alignment, after completing the qualitative coding and thematic analysis, we realized that dividing the data into separate thematic buckets broke up the complexity of experience and did not holistically explain the phenomena of education worker mental health and well-being during the pandemic. A further conceptualization of the themes drove us to rethink educators' experiences in their full complexity, as an interconnected ecology. We use the word ecology to express the interrelated nature of teaching as a function of public education; it cannot be extracted from the societal or historical context, nor can it easily be separated from the realm of personal experience.

We describe this ecology through three major spheres that relate to the differing levels of interaction intersecting with educator workers' mental health and well-being. Together, these spheres assemble an ecology of influence.

The outer sphere, the "atmosphere" of education, includes external influences such as the historical context, ideologies and beliefs about teachers and schooling, public perception, government and employee relations, pandemic stress and uncertainty, and social determinants of health (such as race, gender, ability, economic inequality). These aspects lay outside of one's control of the environment, yet, as our analysis has shown, can greatly affect the experience of being an education worker in a pandemic.

The middle sphere, the "terrain of praxis," combines the pedagogical and institutional aspects of teaching. In this space, education workers encounter and navigate changes in the modality of teaching (online, hybrid, in-person), Board and Ministry directives, relationships with administrators and colleagues, students, and students' parents/guardians, and health and safety protocols (or lack thereof). Major shifts in the praxis sphere have drastically affected the daily lives of teachers and education workers in how they connect to their school communities, students, and to their jobs.

The inner sphere, the "core," describes the intimate, personal, aspects of teaching and being a teacher. This sphere engages the factors of agency, coping and resistance, and well-being. It also is the sphere where teachers connected physical effects of mental health and wellness; their sense of exhaustion for instance at the "piling on" of workload, the anticipatory anxieties of emergency pedagogy, and the fears and concerns over changes to the profession. This inner sphere is deeply connective to the middle and outer layer as teachers' personal perceptions, coping, resistances, and hope all inflect on their engagement with the terrain of praxis and the influence of the atmosphere of education. It is in this sphere we saw the strongest emphasis on coping, where teachers communicated the strongest sense of their mental health and well-being and what they can do. This was in small decisions for establishing personal boundaries, in finding moments of rest and pause, in making decisions that positively affect them and their students that mitigated the unprecedentedness of the pandemic, the changes beyond their control, and for the health, well-being, and success of their students and themselves.

Similar to the recommendations put forward in the two prior CTF/FCE reports on teacher mental health, the further recommendations at the beginning of this report are developed from understanding the many factors which influence teachers' current job contexts. The recommendations have not changed over time, but need repeating because they have not been implemented, leaving a growing list of necessary supports for education workers building over time. One simple recommendation mentioned throughout this report is the need to listen to education workers, to value their experiences and professional expertise, and to include teachers in decision-making processes, as they are expert problem solvers who, if given the chance, would have contributed greatly to managing educational change and suggesting alternatives throughout the pandemic.

Although we are still grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic and are unsure of the what the future will hold for vaccinations, further waves, or navigating the push for increased virtual and digital learning spaces, the collective, societal trauma experienced by education workers cannot be understated or ignored. Supports are needed to bolster morale, to re-examine (and change) unhealthy workload expectations, and provide space for teachers to be autonomous professionals who experience joy and satisfaction when connecting with students. These supports need to be implemented without education workers being continually overwhelmed by exhaustion and disillusionment in the profession.

These recommended changes and supports are important for educator mental health and well-being, but also for the future of the teaching profession. The qualitative research shows us how and where teachers and educations workers need support, however, strong advocacy and sustained engagement is needed to enact and implement changes for the profession, and for all education system spheres.

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[32] The OECD's "The Economic Impacts of Learning Losses" (2020) for example places emphasis on the economic losses of students being out of school enforcing the relationship of schooling and economic development.


But
at
what
cost?